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# Defining Liberty

The nature of the relationship between "universals" — Humanity, Justice, Goodness, etc. — and "particulars" — this human being, this instance of justice, and that instance of goodness — is a matter that philosophers have been busy at work trying to iron out for millennia. On a reasonably broad spectrum, there are two rival poles: the one is represented by Plato, the other by John Locke.

Plato insisted that not only are universals real, they are ultimately *more* real than particulars. Universals are eternal, immutable, and incorruptible while particulars, in contrast, are temporal, mutable, and corruptible. For example, individual human beings come and go, but the universal of Humanity is always and forever the same. It is the universal that invests the particular with identity and, thus, renders us capable of recognizing it as the particular that it is. From this perspective, particulars stand in relation to universals as shadows stand in relation to the objects that cast them: particulars *depend* upon universals for their being.

Hence, Plato's position has been branded an especially robust form of "realism."

John Locke, on the other hand, didn't just reject the notion that universals are more real than particulars; he staunchly rejected the very idea that universals are real at all. Universals have no "ontological" standing. They have no reality, that is. They are but general *terms* that we invent for the sake of rendering our experience of particulars more manageable. So, for instance, there is no such thing as "humanity"; there are only individual, particular human beings. From our experience with the latter, we abstract those features that are common to all humans. To this set of common features we ascribe the label, *the name,* "humanity."

Because of his claim that universals are really just *names* that we reserve for groups of particulars, Locke's position is known as "nominalism."

Interestingly, while Plato's and Locke's perspectives on the relationship between universals and particulars are mutually incompatible, they both *agree* that particulars of any given kind must be related by way of some common characteristics. So, in order for *this* being and *that* being to both be *human* beings, there must be some attributes that they share in common with one another as well as with *every* other human being so-called.

It is this supposition that we should rethink while contemplating *liberty*.

"Liberty" is a general or universal term. This much no one would think to dispute. Nor would anyone think to deny that people's experience(s) with liberty is real. The question, though, is whether there in fact are common ideas upon which people's experiences with liberty converge.

Given the varied understandings of liberty of which just our own political universe consists, to say nothing of those that inform the political worlds of others, it would appear that *if* there are any beliefs around which all of these center, they are so abstract as to be virtually meaningless. Liberty, it may be said by all self-proclaimed partisans of liberty, entails freedom of one sort or another. This answer, though, is not at all enlightening and, in fact, only compounds our problem, for we are left asking: what does it mean to be *free?* As is the case with liberty, there are as many mutually exclusive accounts of freedom as there are statements of liberty, and it appears that there are no other commonalities among them to be found.

Liberty is said to be a "positive" good, the freedom *to* pursue x, y, or z. It is also claimed that it is "negative," the freedom of the individual *from* external interference vis-à-vis his pursuits. Liberty is supposedly a "power" that, as such, presupposes a distribution of material satisfactions that is far less unequal than that typically found in "capitalist" societies. On the other hand, far from being inseparable from liberty, many argue that such distributive schemes are radically antithetical to it. Liberty, we are told by some, consists in "rights;" others emphasize the role of "duties" in defining liberty. Some say that liberty demands a strong federal government, while others regard such a thing as a threat to liberty. Liberty, on one view, requires government, while on another, liberty precludes government. Liberty is rooted in religion and it is undermined by religion.

In short, leftists affirm liberty and freedom just as surely as do libertarians and anarchists, and these ambiguous concepts find their most vocal champions among orthodox Muslims no less than among the most "apple pie" of Americans.

Maybe there is some unchanging, eternal standard of liberty by which we can evaluate particular understandings of liberty. If so, however, we have as yet proven incapable of discovering what it is. And maybe there is some set of overlapping features that these conceptions of liberty share in common, but if so, we have been similarly incapable of discerning them. For this reason, those of us who love our liberty are much better off devoting our energies to nourishing and nurturing *our* liberty — a particular *this* rather than an ever elusive universal abstraction.

Once we grasp what we in some sense have always known, that the liberty to which we have always been committed is as complex and simple, as concrete and particular, as culturally and historically-specific as our own families, then and only then will we be able to recognize the extent to which we have been bedeviled by folly for generations. Our zeal for liberty impaired our vision as we mistook our *abridgment* of our tradition of liberty for a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that, we were convinced, all legitimate accounts of liberty must satisfy. Yet it was this delusion, on our part, this inability to see the forest for the trees, that has encouraged us to indulge in fantasies of government-free "states of nature," American-style "Democracy" in the Middle East, societies in which equality as a substantive condition of affairs would prevail, and societies in which people from every conceivable culture could come together and join hands around a few simple, "self-evident" propositions.

It can't be stressed enough: American liberty is as culturally particular as apple pie itself. Let us appreciate it for what it is before it is too late.