



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on May 23, 2016

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What Is Freedom?

Everyone wants freedom, but what is the proper meaning of freedom? Does it consist in being able to do anything we want? Or, as some believe, is it doing whatever we want, as long as no one else is harmed?

In its broadest possible sense, the word “freedom” denotes an action or state free from external restraint or compulsion. In this sense alone is there any similarity between liberty and libertinism, between ambition and lust. The fact that we associate these two very different types of behavior is mostly by linguistic accident — but it is an accident that has been the source of many grievous misunderstandings; a lot of conduct that we carelessly call “freedom” is in fact nothing of the kind.



In fairly recent history, America was convulsed by a social, political, and moral revolution that, during the '60s and '70s, managed to overthrow most of the long-established norms of a moral code rooted in Judeo-Christian religion. During that time period, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual activity became widely accepted, along with the recreational use of drugs and the production and consumption of pornographic magazines and movies. Abortion on demand was decreed by an activist Supreme Court. In our own time, that same counterculture now seeks to normalize and validate sexual perversion, including same-sex “marriage” and transgender “rights.” And all of these products of the counterculture, then and now, have been promoted as “freedoms” and “individual rights.”

How do such so-called freedoms differ in essence from, for example, citizens owning or carrying firearms for self-defense, or carrying out enterprises freely in a free market economy, or following a religion of their choosing, or freely expressing their opinions without fear of censorship or imprisonment? Surely we would all acknowledge these, and many other similar activities, as behaviors typical of a free people. Most of us would also regard these as “good” exercises of personal freedom, while considering drug abuse or sexual promiscuity “bad.”

But, claim the defenders of the latter activities, freedom is an absolute. It cannot be held to moral standards, since that would lead to favoring one set of religious or moral values over another.

In the real world, there is no such thing as conduct without a moral dimension. This is the reason that people always condemn and seek to limit moral choices that do not square with their own beliefs. For just as the devout Christian will be inclined to condemn, outlaw, and otherwise disincentivize sexual misconduct, so too will the atheists and otherwise irreligious among us consistently take offense at what have been termed “family values,” and labor ceaselessly to legislate them into oblivion. In general, it is the same people who urge upon us laws promoting homosexuality and abortion who are eager to strip Americans of freedoms such as the right to keep and bear arms and the right to express opinions



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without being attacked by the zealots of political correctness — all while trying to force people with religious scruples to support homosexual causes and so-called abortion rights. The notion that freedom is morally blind is an obvious fiction.

There are thus two different types of freedom: genuine freedom, which requires internal restraint and accepts moral responsibility, and counterfeit freedom, which does neither. To the former class belong all those activities that stem from our natural or God-given rights; these are genuine freedoms, because they always come with moral responsibility. The right to keep and bear arms, for example, presupposes the self-restraint in their use. Society would quickly fall apart if gun owners did, in fact, behave as they are so often caricatured in the hostile press, shooting and killing one another for trivial or non-existent causes. The right to engage in free enterprise entails the responsibility to refrain from fraud — to honor contracts, pay debts, tell the truth about what we are selling, and so forth. Such activities all require self-restraint; who has not been tempted, on occasion, to take something that is not his, or inflict violence on someone who has insulted him?

Such freedoms come not only with moral responsibilities, but also with consequences. The gun owner who, in a fit of anger shoots his neighbor with whom he has had an argument over the length of the hedge, will be punished. The successful entrepreneur who defrauds investors will be sent to prison.

By contrast, the essence of libertinism or counterfeit freedom is the repudiation of internal restraint coupled with the evasion of moral responsibility and consequences. In “sowing his wild oats,” the Casanova is committing profoundly antisocial acts (whose consequences may include children out of wedlock, broken marriages, and terrible emotional damage on his so-called conquests), for which he wishes to evade all responsibility. This is why the sexually promiscuous seek to overturn laws against adultery, abortion, pornography, and other activities associated with sexual misconduct. Such counterfeit freedoms only benefit those who foolishly expect to live free of moral restraint.

As Northrop Frye pithily pointed out, “Freedom is not doing what you want, it is wanting to do what you have to do.”

The difference between genuine and counterfeit freedom is of enormous consequence, because the latter kind is the enemy of the former. The very essence of free society is voluntary moral restraint; take this away, and society will cease to function — unless external compulsion (i.e., government) is substituted for it. As British statesman Edmund Burke famously observed:

Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

This, then, is genuine freedom: the exercise of our God-given rights, coupled with the self-restraint to refrain from abusing them, and the willingness to accept the consequences for their abuse. It is upon freedoms such as these that political liberty depends. The counterfeit freedoms enjoined on us by the leftist counterculture, by contrast, if left unchallenged, will soon destroy our society and our liberty along with it.



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