

FREEDOM, POWER AND PEACE: A CRITIQUE OF CAPITALIST INDIVIDUALISM

Gene Bales

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My topic today was suggested by a member of this congregation, though I confess I may be taking the issues at hand in directions no one quite anticipated. The topic is, briefly, the connection between peace and freedom, and that connection I want to suggest is something like power. But there is an underlying issue that I want to draw your attention to, and that is our tendency as Americans to conceive of moral and ethical issues along individualistic lines. Individualism is a trough from which all of us drink pretty regularly, whether we think about it or not. When we think about either peace or freedom, we are often focused on the individual's will to achieve one or the other for themselves. It is my intention not to question the importance or reality of that understanding of individualism, but to point to the implications of our focus on the individual, and to understandings of freedom that are not rooted in the individual alone.

The order of my remarks will be to think a bit about the history of individual freedom in the west, then the notion of political freedom and the notion of power, and finally to look at peace in light of all these ideas.

1. Freedom

Freedom is understood as something both moral and political. Morally freedom is the condition for the kind of action that can legitimately be labeled good or evil. We cannot be held responsible for good or evil actions if we were not free when we did them; or conversely we are responsible for what we do if we were free when we did them. Usually it is pretty clear if we were free or not. But there are lots of instances where it is much less clear whether we are personally free. Remember Patty Hearst; she was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army, but then appeared to take part in a bank robbery they staged. People wondered: did she do that willingly or was she coerced?

There are even more difficult questions that folks today debate endlessly. Is a homosexual free to choose to be one? Or is freedom just a matter of what action one has done? Maybe all sexual acts are free—that is, we are held responsible for them in general—but maybe sexual orientations are not. But are they? Are those who are pedophiles correct in saying that they are not responsible for their desires?

In all this, we think of freedom as a matter of will power, and we think of it as residing in the individual will. Hannah Arendt has argued that this vision of the will as the heart of freedom is not universal at all, and that in the West its popularity dates back at least to St. Augustine, and perhaps further back to St. Paul. Perhaps its real debut came in the Hebrew Scriptures when some of the prophets overturned the old adage that violating God's law would cause punishment to all of one's generations, and claimed that sin was individual and could not be inherited by children from their parents.

Freedom of the will has a strongly moral cast which is related to its usefulness in deciding responsibility before the throne of God, at least in the Hebrew and Christian mindset.

The individualistic notion of freedom from Augustine and St. Paul was important in grounding the notion of sin in relation to salvation. The secret of moral action was responsibility, and responsibility presupposed real freedom to do or not do something. For Augustine, we were only free to do evil; to do good, only God's grace would be sufficient. It became clear that human affairs could be good only if the community of saints stood at the base of political life. Short of that, the public realm was a shadowy realm redeemed only by its functional utility in human life.

This rather pessimistic view of freedom and the public realm would remain dominant in more conservative views of human affairs. But the concept of the freedom of the individual will turned out to have more functionality to it than its initial appearance in Augustine's theology.

The first arena where freedom of the individual will had a marked influence was in the history of marriage. We sometimes forget what kind of radical change was in store for marriage when the medieval theologians decided that it was the two individuals getting married whose free consent was the substance of the sacrament of marriage. In one stroke the practice of arranged marriages, or marriages as

relations between two families, began to take second place to what has become the modern notion of two people who freely create their own lives together.

And marriage was not the only institution revolutionized by the focus on freedom. Equal in importance was the notion that the engine of economic work was to be the individual entrepreneur and his or her paid employees, as opposed to the world of masters, apprentices, and just plain old slave labor. From the beginning this implied that business should be free from external compulsion or regulation, so as to maximize profits. And maximizing one's profits would generate the good of everyone—the invisible hand at work, according to Adam Smith in one of his more religious moments.

So freedom of the individual was the ground of both freedom in one's private desires for marital intimacy and one's private desires to make as much money as possible. The outside world—other people, the government, external families—were all negative in their significance, at least in theory.

2. Public Realm and Power

The realm of the public, the realm of government, was not fundamental in this vision. It was perhaps a fact of life, but the business of life and marriage demanded attention, and so it is not surprising that our founding fathers opted for a representative, rather than a radical, democracy. Radical democracy takes too much time. But the public realm began to suffer because it was identified with all the things that limit and regulate the realm of the private.

Is the public or political realm inherently hostile to freedom? While the modern history of freedom gives a mixed view of the relation between the two, the ancient Greeks had a different understanding. In that view, freedom was the public realm in which a person could do great actions. Freedom may be rooted in the private will, but its importance for human beings is to be seen when political life is shaped by the deeds of political actors. In that sense, the realm of freedom is a realm of a plurality of beings each of whom discloses him or herself to others. For this to happen the meaning of such deeds needs to be communicated. There is no action without communication. Freedom is not about the individual in isolation, but about the individual as an acting agent in a community with others.

It is at this point that public freedom and its plurality point to the existence of power. Genuine power is the power to act, to do something of importance in the public sphere. Power is guaranteed, has its life and existence, only in the public sphere. Totalitarianism, the first new form of government since ancient times, cannot tolerate the existence of any freedom at all, unlike tyranny which has room at least for the tyrant's freedom.

But what exactly is the moral significance of the power that is simultaneous with the public sphere?

To see the answer to this question, I think it is good to examine the condition of public life before it implodes into something like tyranny or totalitarianism. Plato addressed the foundations of tyranny in his Republic. There he suggests that the conditions of democracy, where everyone does what they want, and where warring factions form as a consequence, that such conditions lead to the degeneration of democracy into tyranny. Totalitarianism, as seen as in the rise of Hitler, Stalin, and various other regimes around the world, was founded on individual isolation and loneliness in mass society, coupled with racist propaganda and the use of ideology as a means of terrorizing everyone. Totalitarianism was from the beginning opposed to the openness of the state and the public realm, and completely crippled the traditional lines of authority and control with shadow political movements and party machinery.

While tyrants used fear to subordinate the masses, the totalitarians used terroristic propaganda to reduce everyone to isolation.

It is only when power, the public realm of power, disappears that we begin to see how important it is for human life and meaning. For it is this kind of freedom that makes us different from anything else in nature: namely, that we enjoy the possibility of determining our political fate together. The Athenian model for political freedom is the assembly, where everyone had the chance to argue or present their case. This is radical democracy, not representative democracy, where only the representatives get to act politically.

This is why the ancient Greeks, so enamored of their form of radical non-representative democracy, could claim that what distinguished humans from

animals was politics; and in the same breath reason. The two were not far apart in their minds.

For the ancient Greeks freedom was not simply a possession of the individual; it was a relation with another who was the object of freedom. Freedom is given to another, or recognized in another. One meaning of being free is being free from enslavement. To free someone is to love them well enough to raise them up to one's own level. That freedom means love is not something one usually thinks about, but becomes apparent when it is recognized that the word "friend" derives from "free". Friends are those who are freed from the world of masters and slaves. The ancient Greeks understood this, in part because they lived quite consciously with that world, whereas we tend to think that slavery is dead, and that nothing like it exists any more. But of course it does. Real slavery has never been abolished, and its shadow world of economic slavery continues in many parts of the world, including our own. Where there are slaves, there are not equals. And where there are no equals, there are no friends.

Aristotle understood the equality in friendship very well. That is because when people are friends there is in some measure recognition of equality. Aristotle assumed that only free men are capable of friendship; friendship was not as likely with one's wife because the husband/wife relation is built on a kind of unequal relation in the privacy of the home. Even Thomas Aquinas echoes this in the Middle Ages, though he adds that friendship between husband and wife is a good of marriage, perhaps in recognition of the Christian belief in the equality of all humans.

Friendship is one of the ways the freedom of the public realm is first seen. Thomas Aquinas would speak of civil or political friendship as the bond which creates political life, a view which he inherited from Aristotle.

Civil or political friendship is the love of another whose place or position in society is quite different, but whose equality with oneself is held to be more important. Creating friendship in the public realm is creating ties and bonds of affection and love with those whose identity is different, but whose commitment is to the public realm. This is not easy for anyone, but it has been done from time to time. The absence of it in public life should be an occasion of alarm.

We are at this point in our country right now, it seems to me. In the public realm, people's positions are divided into two neatly complementary categories, rather like sheep and goats, and the assumption is members of these two groups cannot, and should not, ever be bridged by something like political friendship. Ideology is far more important than anything else.

We need only compare political life from earlier periods of our history. Granted there was always the specter of partisan politics and considerable name-calling, but the idea that two people from different political parties or persuasions could not find friendship and thus common causes was unheard of. But today that kind of friendship has almost disappeared from American government.

The result is a continuing civil warfare fought out in the media. The atmosphere has become increasingly poisoned and strident.

3. Peace

So, one must ask how does this impact the chances for peace either internally or externally? There have always been those who argue that war is the innate condition of the human species, and that peace is just the time when humans prepare for the next war. But frankly one could just as well argue that the experience of war up close pulls the rug out from the glamour of it all, and makes peace-makers out of some.

Public power is dissolved in war; the discovery of the public realm is a great moral discovery, and makes the achievement of peace possible and real. Yet the moral importance of power has been largely neglected by moralists and others. There are several things that account for this. First of all, power is often confused with control. Now, control over events or things does give us a certain public power; but control alone does not create free citizens in the public realm. When power is acknowledged as resting on control, but as not being about controlling others (specifically), then one has arrived at a better understanding of power. Power is the condition of equality among human agents acting in the political realm. As the condition of equality it is a moral phenomenon, and not neutral in its significance. Control, by contrast, may be either good or evil, depending on its goal. Power is not defined by its goal, because it doesn't have any. Or to put it another way,

power is its own goal; the human political sphere is its own goal. Perhaps this is why Aristotle thought that *homo politicus* was so close to the gods.

This view is missing from the Christian tradition, largely because of the idea from Augustine that secular political life is defined by its utility in this world, which lacks the gravity of being a realm of grace. The only cure for this was to see that the state or public life had to be defined in some final fashion by the Church and by God. This may have abandoned political life to this world, but it also left the sense that politics was strictly utilitarian in its significance. And that mistaken view, I believe, obliterated any positive evaluation of political power.

Let me turn then to the idea of peace and its connection with freedom and power.

Like our notion of freedom, peace has come to mean one of two things: the peace that resides within individuals and the peace that exists between governments, usually as the outcome of war. Inward peace is an ideal not just found in the Christian West, but also among the religions of the East. In Christian thought, peace is founded upon faith in God and Christ, and in fact is often identified with it. If this peace has a political impact it is simply by its being spread by individuals. But of course it isn't that simple or effective, and Christians have often joined in the political wars of their generations. There has always been a tension between the inward religious peace of faith and the capacity of Christians for war. While some have resolved that tension in favor of pacifism, many have been left with a commitment to inward peace on the one hand and outward war if necessary on the other.

Peace has another meaning than an inward experience. So we speak of the Peace of Versailles, or the Peace of this or that treaty. Here peace is clearly a political reality worked out in a treaty or covenant. It is a function of governments and armies.

At its etymological root, peace from the Latin *pax* has the meaning of fastening, of joining one thing to another (curiously it is related to the word "page" which refers to something bound together). Ironically it is the political meaning of peace that best preserves that notion of joining, in the sense of joining one government to another. If the political or public realm is founded on the political association, I would argue that peace is very much at the heart of political association.

Individual peace, peace within the individual does not appear to join anyone to anything, except perhaps to God. This is not a bad thing; but it does point out one possible limitation to the sense of peace with God—namely, that it can coexist within an individual caught in the war of one against all.

The war of one against all is what Thomas Hobbes characterized as the state of nature. Hannah Arendt suggested that Hobbes' vision of politics was in fact a vision of capitalism: that the free marketplace inevitably degenerates into economic wars, with the government's purpose being defined as imposing peace when the market ultimately fails. What is important about all this is that capitalist freedom is just exactly the opposite of political freedom and political friendship. In the marketplace it is "buyer beware"; in the political realm it is "behold the citizen of the world, gracious and courteous to strangers," as Sir Francis Bacon said.

The possibility of peace is not simply founded on association, however. It may actually be founded on something religious in its significance—namely, the recognition of the equality of the enemy, at least in a political sense. I would like to propose that Christianity's great gift to peace-making is twofold: namely, that the enemy is to be seen as someone to be loved—in contradistinction to every conventional morality; and that the traditional relation of God to human in terms of tyranny is to be understood in terms of friendship. It is only if one sees the enemy as a friend, or at least as a potential friend, that one can come to work toward peace. With the achievement of peace-making, the enemy becomes a partner in political life, a friend with whom one may disagree at times, but with whom one does not go to war.

Perhaps it is a bit of a stretch to understand Christian peace-making as a fulfillment of Aristotle's vision of political association. But peace is pact-making, covenant-making, and pact-making is exactly what ordinary people do in creating a stable public realm.

Capitalism may make pacts, and capitalist individuals may unite with others to maximize profits. But the end result is not really peace, because what is at stake is

control over conditions that may impede profits. The ultimate outcome of pacts among businesses is the monopoly; and monopolies can be utterly ruthless in wiping out competition. Far from creating conditions of peaceful equality, capitalism is constantly in danger of eliminating the public realm. The recent decision of the Supreme Court to allow direct contributions of corporations to candidates was widely lamented; one of the most obvious consequences is the way in which the agenda in the public realm will be increasingly tilted against anyone outside the family of monopolistic corporations in our society.

At the end, I am convinced that peace in this life is a function of the vitality of political associations, and a function of the vitality of the Christian and religious commitment to peace-making among those who see one another as enemies. Civic friendship and divine friendship point toward a common goal in a peace that has its roots in another world, but is not limited to that world. The Kingdom of God, founded on peace-makers, is both in this world, and yet not of it. That duality generates enormous energy. What may defeat that energy is the combination of capitalist individualism and a Christian commitment to ignore love of the enemy in favor of salvation from the world of enemies.