

Killing freedom by stealth

Judy Englander

'Freedom' is fast becoming the most abused word in the English language. For although it is true that word meanings are not absolute and intrinsic, but are defined by use, the way the commonplace and commonsense understanding of 'freedom' is being changed by the usage promoted by authoritarian intellectuals, is an illuminating - and frightening - lesson on how 'newspeak' can help us forget what freedom is by first destroying the word.

The usual tactic is to give freedom a meaning already carried by other words, thereby obscuring its distinguishing qualities.

Thus freedom has been variously described as freedom from want (or hunger, or need, etc.); freedom to be subject to rational laws (or laws which you agree with, or laws which correspond with what your higher self would agree with if asked, à la Rousseau, Bosanquet and Green); freedom in participating in the body politic; freedom in merging with the collective (nation, race or class); freedom not to be sacked or made redundant; freedom not to hear/see/put up with the National Front (based on the easy principle, freedom for anything I like or am indifferent about, no freedom for anything I loathe); freedom in knowing God/Jesus/Buddha/TheWay; freedom to live the way you are accustomed to (Burke); and in general, the freedom not to have anything unpleasant happen to you.

The list of linguistic cop-outs is endless, and is contributed to by both left and right. It probably stems from the perpetrators' inability to come to terms with the fact that freedom proscribes the enforcement of their versions of virtue; that freedom throws open the door to an almost infinite diversity of life-styles (although in practice a free society may well turn out quite spontaneously to be morally and culturally conservative). It is a problem which seems to trouble particularly those busy-bodies who are inordinately interested in the ways other people live, a concern which in some cases becomes activated in the exercise of power. Notice how all the spurious 'freedoms' have meanings already conveyed by words such as wealth, security, happiness, subsistence, belongingness, tradition, reason, enlightenment, participation, intolerance and virtuousness. Notice how, when freedom becomes identified with these other values, it

loses its distinguishing characteristics. The heart of the concept indicated by a word is that which at once differentiates it from other concepts and unifies its components under a common idea.

So for the word 'freedom' to be meaningful and useful to Libertarians, it should denote a special characteristic. Ironically, freedom's special character is negative. It is a complete vacuum, a 'space' in which a variety of options, circumscribed only by 'the possible', are open. 'The possible' includes natural and human obstacles.

Freedom is not the ability to do something in particular or be something in particular. Doing and being are ways of filling the space. Being well fed, rational or away from the National Front are ways in which we exercise our freedom, just as being starving, homeless and stupid are other ways of filling freedom's space. That the latter are not what people usually want is beside the point, because freedom is not the same as satisfaction and happiness.

Libertarians do, in fact, believe that a free society is best able to avoid starvation and homelessness, and satisfy the wide range of human needs. For many Libertarians this utilitarian consideration is their primary goal, freedom being seen as a means to this end. What genuine Libertarians do not do is say that freedom, need-fulfilment and happiness are all the same thing.

To concretise the definition of freedom as a space filled with options, imagine a society where individual property-owners rub shoulders with commune members; where free-enterprise TV's five hundred channels provide everything from continuous culture to non-stop porn where trade union labour competes with independent workers; where some streets carry advertising hoardings and some do not; where some transport companies and restaurants ban smoking and some permit it; where some families are nuclear and others extended; where some men and women have one spouse and others more. Freedom is the 'shop-around' society. What a nightmare for the busybodies!

Free Life