

## Irritating libertarians or a philosophy of real freedom...

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Someone I don't know [tweeted this late last week](#):

*I recommend all Liberals and NeoLibs follow @RichardJMurphy. You won't agree with anything he says but his musings are enjoyably infuriating.*

So why do I irritate a particular type of libertarian? It's a question I asked myself because it's very obviously true and yet I think of myself as both liberal and as being committed to personal freedom.

I think the answer comes down to what we mean by freedom. It's my suspicion that those libertarians that I irritate think freedom means being able to do what they like without constraint and maybe, even, restraint. I am aware that simplifies an ideology into one short sentence, but on this occasion I see no harm in that. I suspect most of the time most libertarians do little more.

I don't see freedom that way. I see freedom as having the choice to commit. As a result I think it is the act of constraining ourselves that is the ultimate expression of freedom.

So, I have committed to my family. I have committed to campaign on tax justice. I have committed to my colleagues. I have committed to live in a place. I have committed to a faith. I have in all these things committed to others. I have necessarily accepted restraint in each case and yet in doing so I obtain freedom. That freedom comes from the commitment of others to support me, and they do. It comes from the freedom from having continually to decide what to do. It comes from knowing I have made choices that seem to matter.

But this freedom is not one that can be enjoyed alone. This is a freedom that can only be enjoyed in company. In that case there is then no freedom for me if others cannot enjoy the opportunity to respond to the commitments I make. So my freedom is not absolute, as the libertarian would have it, with each free to enjoy without consideration for others. My freedom is wholly conditional on the freedom of others, and even on their ability to respond to me. So if those to whom I commit cannot or do not commit to me,

to at least some degree, my freedom is necessarily constrained unless I, of course, then exercise the freedom to think again. That is why in this definition of freedom the ability to change one's mind, which appears anathematic to libertarians, is so important.

That freedom to rethink commitment is however, again, conditional. It assumes that those to whom I have committed can freely reciprocate my commitment. But suppose they cannot. Suppose their ability is constrained. What then? Am I free to ignore their constraint when reacting to their commitment to me? I think that in turn requires a conditional response.

If the constraint is of their own making then I might accept their actions. So, if they decided to reject or abuse my personal commitment and no other party is involved in any material way and I have made reasonable efforts to overcome the grounds for their rejection then I have to accept it is their right to reject my commitment. In that case it is my duty to accept that rejection and moved on because my continued commitment might otherwise harm me or them.

If on the other hand others are impacted by their rejection of me I have to consider whether I must commit to that person nonetheless to protect the harm their rejection might cause to others who might be affected or suffer similar treatment. That is because my commitments are not independent of each other. They are collective. For example, I cannot commit to one of my sons without the other because to do so would harm them both, and their relationship, and, of course me. It would also harm their mother and my relationship with her. I do not in that case have the freedom to reject one relationship without considering its impact upon another if I am truly to be free in all my commitments. The pain of rejection is, then, a necessary part of this freedom to commit and to be accepted as part of it.

As important though is the situation where the rejection does not arise from the choice of the individual, but from constraint on their capacity to make that choice. Suppose they are so economically oppressed they feel unable to reciprocate my commitment. Or suppose they could not do so because of ill health. Or because they did not have a necessary skill that had been denied to them but which they had the necessary inherent ability to master. Or suppose that others imposed on them a constraint that prevented their reciprocation without good reason. What then? Do I have the right to walk away from my commitment in those cases?

I do not think that possible, any more than I think it possible to live at present without making commitments to those to whom some such constraints might apply. That's the consequence of living in any society, which as a matter of fact we all do. But in that case we have to accept it is a matter of nothing more than chance that to a very large (but not sole) degree determines where we find ourselves and what constraints might be imposed upon us.

So, it was accident of birth that once gave a few the prerogative of education. It

appears that this might be coming true again within the UK, whilst around the world it is an accident of the location of a person's birth that still determines this for many, as a matter of fact.

The same is, of course, true of healthcare.

And for freedom of expression.

And for economic well being.

And for all basic human rights.

The freedom to reciprocate the choice of commitment that I want to make is to some degree constrained. For a great many it is, I am well aware, considerably more constrained in a great many ways.

Does the fact that others suffer more constraint than I do give me the right to ignore their constraint and reappraise their relationship with me? I do not think so. I cannot but live in community with these people. As a matter of fact the people around me, and ultimately all the people in this world, are my community. If they are constrained, and that is a constraint that I can have impact upon, then I do not have the right to turn my back on that other person who is suffering that constraint. My commitment to them, willingly made by the reality of being in community with them, requires that I seek the freedom for them that by accident or endeavour (and it does not matter which) I, at least, enjoy. If I do not my own freedom is constrained because they cannot reciprocate to me.

My duty goes further though. If I am aware that the constraint another faces arises not by chance but as a consequence of the deliberate action of another, whether intentional as to its outcome or not, then I have both a duty to advise that person of the consequences of their actions and to seek to get them to change their behaviour. That duty to seek change is not unconditional, of course. To seek change from the oppressor that would then impose constraint on their capacity to choose would clearly be unacceptable. That wrong could not compensate their own mistake.

But in that case there is clearly a minimum required conduct that the freedom to commit demands. This is a recognition that this freedom can only be truly enjoyed when all can participate in it. So, for example, there is no religious freedom unless all can commit to their religion of choice. And there is no freedom to commit to a relationship unless all can commit to their relationships of choice. And the right to work is constrained unless all have the opportunity to do so. It is even true that the right to self employment and to manage your own fortune is constrained unless all have that right: the free access to capital that is a condition of the effective operation of markets is a requirement if there is to be freedom to commit to entrepreneurship.

This, then, requires a universalist approach and yet one that is dependent upon the right actions of each individual. There is quite clearly an ethic within the individual freedom to commit that renders it meaningless unless all have the means to reciprocate. When they don't there is a demand for action. Until the freedom to reciprocate is delivered there is a duty to compensate, but that is insufficient of itself to relieve the obligation to deliver on the promise of freedom to commit for all. The requirement is to deliver that right; compensation can never be enough.

The consequence is that this philosophy of freedom demands change until all are free. It can never be satisfied because someone is free if another is not. And that is where it starkly contrasts with the right wing libertarian view. And that is why those who subscribe to that view are bound to find me irritating. There is in what I think and the way I act a direct challenge to the egotistic, self centred approach of the libertarian who sees their freedom as existing independently of the constraints it may impose on other's freedom to commit. I am not worried by being that cause of irritation. I think I have a moral obligation to irritate them in that way. I think their acts are wrong in that they would, if allowed, constrain others freedom to commit by denying them the necessary foundations of well-being that permit them to do so.

But that does not mean I am not committed to freedom. It does not even mean I am not committed to freedom to choose. I am committed to both. But that is the precise point. It is in my commitment that I am made free, and not by the absence of constraint that I am liberated.

You have the right to choose, of course. But I will tell you now that your choice is not unconditional, whether you like it or not. It will impact on others, inevitably. And that is why your choice can also be right, or wrong. Do I need to spell out that libertarians have got it wrong? I would have thought not. But then, it is my obligation to say so, because in the process I seek to remove the constraint they choose to place on the freedom of others to commit as they think appropriate.