

“Freedom is not sacrificed only when others tell us what to say, where to go, how to behave. A society that claims to enable people to realize their potential, but fails to change the structures that prevent everyone from flourishing, is also oppressive. And yet, despite all constraints, we never lose our inner freedom: the freedom to do what is right.”

*Lea Ypi. Free: Coming of age at the End of History. London: Penguin Books, 2022, p.305.*

Freedom, as presented by Lea Ypi, is not only found in the material reality, but also in the mind. Societies that appear free, but restrict human growth, can be classified as oppressive. Despite this, the oppressed never lose their freedom to think and act upon what they consider to be righteous.

Imagine a solitary cell. There is no access to sunlight, fresh air, sounds or smells of the earth, and even movement is restricted. Necessities such as food and water are provided, and there are a small showerhead and toilet in the corner. The bed is by no means the greatest, but it allows one to get their needed rest. Everything needed to sustain life, is available. Despite being locked up and restricted, would this prisoner not be able to reflect, ponder and try to act upon the principles of equality and justness?

Our present time might be considered paradoxical. The free world as we have previously understood it as finds itself in a state of anarchy, where all principles and ideas- thought to lay the groundwork of our systems- are being challenged, bent and distorted. This truly raises multiple important human questions. How is our freedom being challenged? Do humans retain their inner wills and freedoms, even when they're physically constrained? Lea Ypi attempts to answer these questions in a way reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre, presenting a reality where our thoughts and values remain unscathed, no matter the trauma and repression of the material world. “Doomed to be free”.

In order to understand Ypi's reflections, we must first determine her perspective and understanding of freedom as a concept. Despite the fact that freedom is to great extent universally agreed upon, there exist other nuances which we will discuss later. From the short excerpt we can categorize freedom in two parts: external and internal. External freedom consists of movement, speech, bodily feelings, and behaviour. The possibility of self-realization is also a part of this, as our success greatly depends on our physical surroundings. These are all sensible; they exist in physical form and reality. On the contrary, internal freedom is presented much like an obligation, a singular, unchallenged concept- to do what is right.

The word “right” is extremely loaded in this context, as the definition(s) of it are not presented. This opens for a broad, unclear definition of righteousness, which may be interpreted in any possible way. As historically proven, right and wrong are not static, but

rather relative. For eons slavery was considered morally and ethically just, whilst under a century ago the extermination of the Jews and Slavs saw one of humanity's greatest catastrophes. In no place of our inhabited world has there been achieved a mutual understanding of right, even though international law and justice exists, to some extent at least.

Due to this the claim made by Ypi, it appears as if more wounds are opened than bandaged. Our understanding of what internal freedom is jeopardized by these grave ethical issues that develop upon closer analysis. On top of that, it is presented as a singular idea, rather than a synthesis of complex thoughts, emotions and ideals, which seem more likely. Claiming human functions to be so simple and meek is rather derogatory and undermines the complexity of our existence and evolution. The understanding of righteousness might be relative and subjective, but using it as the sole descriptor of internal freedom is destructive and overlooks human history. Which brings us to freedom, and how the idea of retention and preservation of it is exhibited, as well as the context of society itself.

It is impossible for humans to exist separately from other- outside a society. Societies lay the groundwork for existence itself. The relationship amongst people, between a mother and a child, a worker and a retiree, are all forms of society and unity. Naturally, these societies differ in form of culture, history, traditions and even freedom, but the principles of them exist in every single one. From ancient Rome to modern Iceland, all implement basic- but subjective- principles of freedom and ethics. Slaves and wagers, all part of a system of relationships and mutuality.

Humans in all these societies share one thing in common- that we are never free of each other. Seeing as we cannot exist outside of a society, we will under all circumstances remain under the effect of one another's ideas, ideals and understanding. In our development throughout life, our own reflections and considerations are influenced by the normative agreements and interpretations surrounding us. Essentially- we are never able to form any completely uninfluenced, actions, original ideas or principles- right and wrong. As we concluded earlier, these principles form our freedoms. We can in this way conclude that freedom does exist, but it is not individual nor original in any of its theorized shapes and forms.

Returning to Ypi's claims, it is important to contextualize them in our hitherto existing societies. Societal structure and order have since the dawn of humanity consisted of control and power, concepts we have yet to leave behind. Both are related to freedom, as a matter of fact the three can be considered a trinity. In any society, they create a harmony between rule, life and development, which makes them essential. At the same time, they can work as oppressive powers.

Modernity brought with it a new understanding of the relationship between these three, forming the idea of modern liberal democracies and societies. Despite this, as presented by Ypi: “A society that claims to enable people to realize their potential, but fails to change the structures that prevent everyone from flourishing, is also oppressive”, the system is not flawless. The consumerist and exploitative nature of capitalism, central in the liberal world order, thwart the growth and progress of many, by controlling the narrative, ideas and understanding of the society, and by creating a societal separation between class, sex and ethnicity.

This oppression is enabled through the means of conflict, media, education and culture. Fearmongering through wars and violence work not only as a distraction, but also as a force of attraction- to the existing narrative. When serious societal issues, such as censorship, oppression, inequality or economy, lead to instability and compromise a narrative or idea, brutality attracts attention and focus, be it international or local. One contemporary example of this might be the Trump-led US administration, which has conducted offensive operations and initiated multiple conflicts over the past months in an attempt to cover up the dwindling economic situation, the horrifying scandals and the suppression of freedom and law. Unfortunately, this abuse of power exists throughout the world, even in established democracies.

Media and education are other exemplary tools of indoctrination. Children, being more susceptible to propaganda, lies and narratives, are targeted systematically on all platforms of communication and schooling, by both organizations and governments. Despite the existence of endless information and knowledge available, the mass forms of media and culture repeatedly prove to be the most efficient tools of oppression- oppression of ideas, thoughts and reflections. By the time one reaches adulthood and gains the ability to reflect, discuss and contemplate, has the ruling narrative not already been chained to their mind and identity?

The fact is, internal freedom can by no means escape unscathed, such a Ypi claims. Our internal understanding of right and wrong, our ideals, and our humanity is shaped by the material, external world. A person born into a society that labels them as subhuman, will under most circumstances retain the idea of their worth and position in society. A person born with the idea that voting every four years between evil and lesser evil, will likely grow to believe that the system is democratic. Due to the relations between humans, I believe it is wrong to claim internal freedom can be protected.

The prisoner in the solitary cell will not be able to discourse, to gain knowledge, reflect with new perspectives, experience art and expression- to be human. The ideas will solely be defined by what previous knowledge they possess, and what the guards are willing to give. This is not freedom, it is an idea of freedom, nearly a delusion. How can one act on what is right, when one cannot even decide or conclude with the nature of

righteousness on their own? They cannot. Without external freedom, there is no possibility to act on what one considers 'right'.

For some freedom is the ability to buy products, for others it is found in the right of expression. I believe freedom is much more than what to do and how to behave. Freedom is an obligation. It is the obligation to interact with humanity, to explore ideas and reflections, to experience and create beauty, to allow other to fulfil themselves, and do the same. It is the reliance we have on each other, the society that shapes us. Having your necessities covered does not make you free, it barely secures your presence on this earth.

The world finds itself in a state of delirium, where the society allows itself to be formed by the ones who lead it, not by the ones who live in it. Terrible things happen in front of our noses, yet we do not even bat an eye. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes this as modern cynicism, the uncaringness of modernity and society- something I do not agree with. It is my opinion it is due to the lack of philosophical intellectual reflections in the greater aspects of society, and the material conditions which the system creates.

The current world order has allowed degenerated and perverse powers to control and affect humanity, through the beforementioned means. Critical thinking and reflection are diminished by serving predetermined and biased information, by worsening our attention, and by creating an addiction to insignificant interests. Mass media operates almost like an opioid, presenting an inexistent reality and conformity, which we all are victims of.

Freedom is therefore something we cannot take for granted, but rather something one must constantly strive for. It is a continuous battle for liberation, which has no clear end. In every fight a sacrifice must be made, including this one. Thousands have and will continue to give up their own freedom in hopes of emancipating us. Lest not forget the importance of humanities- art and expression, discourse and reflection, the foundations of society and existence as a whole.