

Are Human Beings Free?

The Possibility for Freedom in Society

Soel Chavon

For much of my life I have pondered the question of freedom. In adolescence I asked myself if one could believe in God's will and in freedom simultaneously. As I studied the history of the world, I became aware of the human struggle for freedom, yet it bothered me to learn that psychology and sociology seriously questioned the possibility for much freedom. Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Erich Fromm revealed to me new dimensions to the problem, challenging my understanding of what the concept of freedom means, and even our desire to be free.

From all of my studying and thinking, my most important conclusion is that *it is impossible to determine whether human beings are free*. This conclusion is difficult for me to accept, but it is, in fact, what I have learned. The study of sociology has had a great deal to do with this conclusion, and it has influenced most of my other beliefs about freedom. I am relatively certain about three other ideas:

1. If freedom exists, it is always limited by social forces that most people are only barely aware of.
2. Most people have a highly exaggerated view of how much freedom they actually have.
3. It is important in U.S. society for people to believe that Americans are free and that most others are not.

The study of sociology will cause many students to think critically about their beliefs about freedom. Sociology is a social science, and its goal must be to try to understand *why things happen*, why human beings act as they do. To ask the question of *why* is to look

for forces at work on the individual—in sociology those forces are social—and to understand action in the context of those forces. An intelligent analysis of cause will include this question: To what extent do people actually control their own choices?

The Meaning of Freedom and Responsibility

To understand to what extent sociologists believe that human beings are free and responsible for their actions, we must tackle the difficult topic of what sociologists mean by the concepts of freedom and responsibility.

What happens when someone does something we do not like? We get angry, and we blame the individual. This tendency to blame others for what they do simply means we believe that they somehow had control over their acts and acted deliberately: "He knew what he was doing!" "She knew that others would be hurt. She doesn't care." "It was his fault that he got her pregnant." "No, it was her own fault." In a sense, we justify our own anger toward what others do by assuming that they had control over their actions. The judges at the Nuremberg Trials after World War II ruled that human beings had acted immorally and that the excuse that they had only been following orders was unacceptable. Instead, they were found guilty of *choosing* to do evil things against humanity: "They knew what they were doing, and they could have said no."

The court system in any society is generally based on the principle that human beings are *in control* of their actions. Pleading insanity means that they are deemed not in control and therefore not responsible for their actions. Sending people to prison or executing them for transgressions usually assumes freedom. Western religion assumes that punishment and reward await us after death primarily because of the choices we make during life, and this assumption implies that we control our own lives.

The concepts of freedom and responsibility both have to do with control over one's own life. Having *freedom* means that individuals control what they think and do. To say that individuals are *responsible* for what they do means essentially the same thing: They are in control. What is meant by *control*? To control one's life means that one understands the choices one makes, understands the options and consequences, and is in the position of actively determining those choices. To be free, therefore, means knowing choice, making choice, and ultimately controlling one's directions according to

choice. If this characterizes what human beings are, we can say that they are free, or are responsible for their acts. And when we declare that people should *take responsibility* for their actions, we mean that they should realize that they are in control and should face the fact that their actions resulted from their free choice.

Sometimes we mean something else by *responsible*. It is often said that "humans should be free, but they also should be responsible." Responsibility in this sense means something different from control over one's life. It means that when I act, my choices should not be completely selfish, my actions should conform to a social morality—in short, that I should act according to conscience. When I act freely, I must consider the rights of others—that makes my actions responsible, and ultimately it means that freedom should be accompanied by respect for other people's freedom. To be free and to act responsibly means that we must limit our own freedom to social considerations.

To act freely, therefore, means that individuals control their own thoughts and actions. To be *responsible* for action means that they are free. To *take responsibility* for their actions means that they recognize and accept the fact that they are free. To say that people should *act responsibly* does not mean that they should be free; it means that when they act, they should conform to a body of rules: freedom is all right as long as free acts are performed within a certain moral context.

Freedom as a Value in American Culture

There is little question that people in the United States believe that they are free and that it is very important to be free. But believing that one is free does not make one free. Indeed, it is important to realize that believing that one is free may stand in the way of being free, may actually prevent one from controlling one's own life. For if we believe that we are already free, efforts to alter whatever stands in the way of achieving control over our own lives seem unnecessary.

Freedom seems real to most Americans. Our wars are fought in the name of freedom, immigrants come to the United States in search of freedom, government justifies much of what it does by claiming that it is defending our freedom, and we generally believe that those who are successful and those who are not get their just rewards because they have freely chosen what to do with their lives.

It is very important for people in the United States.

they are free. Indeed, it is important for most people to feel that. It means that they control their own destinies. If we did not believe these things, much of what happens in society would not make much sense to us: "After all, if we're not really free, what is the difference between our society and the rest of the world?" "What are the revolutions in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe all about?" "If people are not really responsible for what they do, then how can we morally justify capital punishment, or even most other instances of punishment (except as a means of rehabilitation or as an expression of simple revenge)?" "If we are not free and responsible for our own actions, then does salvation make any sense, does life have any real meaning, or do we have any right to take pride in what we do?" "If I am not responsible for my own acts, then I really shouldn't care about my life—after all, it actually isn't *my* life."

It is important for every society to hold people responsible for their actions, assuming that they know what they are doing and punishing those who make evil choices. Society works only because such ideas exist and are an integral part of *culture*. Freedom is a central value in our culture, and we have a great many ideas that defend its existence. However, our question remains: Are human beings really free?

The Sociological View: The Power of Society

The Sociological Dilemma

Sociologists are caught in a great dilemma: They want to believe that human beings can be free, yet they understand so well how all-powerful society seems to be. Sociologists like to claim that "society shapes the individual, but the individual shapes society." But when it really comes down to it, their work shows many of the ways in which society shapes us and very few ways in which the individual shapes society. Emile Durkheim was a champion of freedom within society, yet his work shows us how powerful society is and tells us almost nothing about how freedom is really possible—neither how the individual can learn real control over his or her own life nor how such real control can even be allowed in society.

Peter Berger shows us that the individual is subject to social controls, social stratification, social institutions, socialization, roles, and groups, yet he claims in his writings that one purpose of sociology is to "liberate" human beings through helping them understand all

the controls that shape them. One is left, however, with a basic question: How much freedom is possible within this all-powerful prison of society? Is any significant freedom possible? Marx, too, yearns for freedom and liberation for all humankind, yet almost all of his work shows the power of society over the individual. He maintains that someday the workers will control their own lives, after a revolution and the overthrow of capitalism. Yet studying Marx normally leaves one with the recognition of the enormous power of society rather than with much hope of liberation.

Social Problems, Social Rates, and Freedom

Perhaps we might continue the sociological approach to freedom by considering an argument made by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Mills argues that to think sociologically is to see oneself located in both society and history. It is to understand that one exists within a social context that has developed over many years. One may experience personal problems—a bad marriage, overwhelming debt, unemployment, a midlife crisis—but such problems must be perceived in the larger context of society if one is to understand why they occur. The personal problems I experience are not mine alone. I experience the same problems as many other people in my position. If I had lived in another age, my problems would have been different. If I lived in another social position in this society, my problems would also be different. The social problems of my society at this particular time set me and others like me up for my personal problems. Although everyone in my position will not have my problems, the nature of society today makes these particular problems much more probable than they would have been in the past (or in another society). The particular problems that individual African Americans face in their personal lives exist because racial hatred, racial discrimination, and lack of decent opportunities exist in the society within which they were born. To live in a society in which child abuse or spouse abuse is common and has historically even been legitimated means that one lives within social forces that encourage many of us to be abusers or the victims of abusers.

Personal problems are linked to the nature of society itself. For example, people do not simply get divorced or commit suicide or commit crime in a random manner. If this were so, each year we would have a different number of such individual events. In fact, such problems occur according to fairly predictable and stable rates.

We know that about half of all marriages today will eventually end up in divorce, because forces in society produce such rates. We know that approximately 19 males out of 100,000 will commit suicide, because the various forces at work in society produce about that many suicides. We have a birthrate, death rate, rate of migration, unemployment rate, school-dropout rate, crime rate, and pregnancy rate. In each case it is clear that society is a powerful force influencing the decisions of the individual. Take any society, any community, any neighborhood: Identify the various rates, and we can better understand why people make the choices they do there. The individual who fools the social forces does not disprove their existence. Usually, it can be shown what social forces are necessary for the individual to rise above those that control so many others.

The existence of *social problems* and *social rates* is one starting point for sociologists in unraveling the question of freedom and responsibility. Where and when we are born subject us to certain social problems and social rates and influence the directions we take in life. If I am born in a ghetto, where the teenage pregnancy rate is extremely high, the chances are higher that I, too, will become pregnant as a teenager; if I am born outside that community, the chances are higher that I will not. Freedom? Maybe, but we do not choose the communities within which we are born, and if we are subject to such rates and problems, we have to work extra hard to go in a direction that others take for granted.

Poverty is an example of how the individual's destiny is influenced by social problems and rates. Although it is common for the general public to argue that poverty exists because people freely choose that direction, sociologists rarely make this claim. Such thinking is called "blaming the victim" for a serious social problem. Who becomes poor? Many people are born into poverty. Many children are poor: 20.7 percent of those under the age of eighteen in 1993; 41 percent of all Hispanic children; 46 percent of all African-American children. Many poor people are women who are single parents or victims of desertion or divorce (about half of all poor families are households headed by women with no husband present). Many are elderly. Many are minorities (31.1 percent of all African Americans are poor, as are 30.6 percent of all Hispanic Americans. Many are people put out of work because of the closing of their places of employment. Many are people in towns and farms left behind by rapid social change (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

Is the poverty that comes to these people a free choice made by them? Do people brought up in a community where public education fails the vast majority of people freely choose to drop out of school? Do women brought up in a community where so many other teenage women get pregnant freely choose to get pregnant? Do people choose to be laid off or freely choose to live in communities where a business moves out because it cannot make it? Do people freely choose to live in a society where their racial group has minority status? Indeed, if I grow up farming, do I freely choose to become a farmer, destined to be put out of business because I cannot compete with large corporate farms?

The public, however, tends to see poverty as resulting from free will. For example, Joe R. Feagin (1975) studied American beliefs about the causes of poverty and found, not surprisingly, an emphasis on individual will rather than on social cause. By far, people regarded reasons such as "poor money management," "lack of effort, talent, or ability," or "loose morals and alcoholism" as good explanations of poverty (more than 80 percent in each case). Bad luck, being taken advantage of, failure of private industry, discrimination, and poor schooling were significantly less important (35 to 60 percent in each case). Clearly, the more personal the reason, the higher it was rated.

Our whole lives are influenced by many social factors: other people around us, socialization, our social class, our social groups, and social institutions, for example.

Take the most personal of our decisions: marriage. We claim the right to make a free choice. But how free is it, given the many social influences on our choice? Indeed, how free are we in our decision to marry in the first place? Bert Adams (1979), a sociologist, put together a theory that summarizes research studies and tries to explain the factors influencing whom we marry. Choice of mate is influenced by all of the following factors: physical proximity (we marry someone who happens to be within one of our social worlds), reaction by significant others to the relationship, similarity in physical appearance, similarity in personality, homogeneity in background (class, race, ethnic group, and religion, for example), absence of unfavorable parental intrusion, lack of alternative attractions, compatibility, and the perception of others that the two people really constitute a pair. Adams lists more personal factors, too (such as physical attractiveness and similar interests in early stages of the relationship), but here I am focusing primarily on social factors, which

are also the focus of his theory. We may have some free choice, but social factors narrow our choice considerably.