Chapter 2: Freedom

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 What is meant by freedom? Is there a relationship between freedom for the individual and freedom for the nation?

In its essence, freedom is the desire of people to be in control of their own lives and destinies and to express themselves freely through their choices and activities. The chapter first defines it simply as the absence of external constraints: a person is free when not subject to external control or coercion and able to decide and act autonomously. But this is only one dimension. Freedom also means widening people's ability to express themselves and develop their creativity and capabilities. A free society lets all its members develop their potential with the minimum of social constraints. Individual and national freedom are closely linked. Societies, like individuals, value independence and wish to protect their culture and future. Mandela's long walk to freedom was a struggle to remove obstacles to the freedom of all South Africans, and Aung San Suu Kyi saw her freedom as connected to the freedom of her people. The same ideal drove our national struggle and the struggles of Asia and Africa against colonial rule. Swaraj (self-rule) expresses this link, being both a political demand and a social value.

Q2 What is the difference between the negative and positive conception of liberty?

Negative liberty is freedom as the absence of external constraints. It defends a minimum area of non-interference in which the individual can do, be or become whatever he or she wishes, and no external authority may intrude. It answers the question 'Over what area am I the master?' and is the idea of 'freedom from'. If this area is too small, human dignity is compromised. Positive liberty is the idea of 'freedom to'. It answers 'who governs me?' with 'I govern myself'. It looks at the relationship between the individual and society and tries to improve social conditions so that there are fewer constraints on developing the individual's personality and capabilities. This needs enabling conditions: freedom from poverty and unemployment, adequate material resources, a say in decision-making so that laws reflect people's choices, and access to education. Positive liberty holds that one is free only within society, so society must be shaped to enable development, whereas negative liberty concerns only the area of non-interference. The two generally support each other, though tyrants can misuse positive-liberty arguments to justify their rule.

Q3 What is meant by social constraints? Are constraints of any kind necessary for enjoying freedom?

Social constraints are restrictions on individual freedom that arise from living in society. They may come from domination and external controls, imposed by force or by a government through laws backed by force, as with colonial rulers or apartheid in South Africa. They can also come from social inequality, such as the caste system, and from extreme economic inequality. Some constraints are necessary. Without any, society would descend into chaos, since people have differing ideas and opinions, conflicting ambitions, and compete for scarce resources. Disputes over parking, housing or land, or over whether a film should be screened, can turn into conflict and violence. Every society therefore needs mechanisms to control violence and settle disputes. A free society itself needs some constraints: respect for differences of views and beliefs, and legal and political restraints so that no group coercively imposes its views on others or bullies people into conformity. Such constraints protect our freedom and can free us from insecurity. The real task is to separate necessary, justifiable constraints from unnecessary ones, using the harm principle and the test of reasonable restrictions.

Q4 What is the role of the state in upholding freedom of its citizens?

The state has a double role. First, it must protect citizens' freedom from harm by others. Following Mill's harm principle, the state may constrain a person whose other-regarding actions cause serious harm to definite individuals, and it should not interfere in self-regarding actions that affect only the actor. For minor harm, such as loud music in an apartment building, only social disapproval is suitable, not police action or legal punishment. The state can also act against hate campaigns that endanger people or foment hatred, but its restrictions must be 'reasonable restrictions': defensible by reason, not excessive and in proportion to the action restricted. A habit of imposing restrictions or banning harms freedom. Second, the state is itself a possible source of constraint, as laws can embody the rulers' power over the people. Democratic government helps because citizens retain some control over their rulers. The state should also help create positive conditions for freedom, such as education, material resources and participation in decision-making, while avoiding needless restrictions.

Q5 What is meant by freedom of expression? What in your view would be a reasonable restriction on this freedom? Give examples.

Freedom of expression is the freedom to hold and express opinions, including freedom of thought and discussion. It is considered part of the minimum area of non-interference and a fundamental value for which society must bear some inconvenience. Mill gave four reasons for defending it, even for ideas that seem false. No idea is completely false, so banning it loses an element of truth. Truth emerges only through a conflict of opposing views. Truth exposed to opposing views avoids becoming an unthinking cliché. We cannot be sure that what we consider true is actually true, since ideas once suppressed as false have later proved true. Voltaire's words capture this: 'I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to death your right to say it.' A reasonable restriction would be one that prevents serious harm to others and is proportionate. Hate campaigns that put people in danger or foment hatred against them can be curbed, for example by restricting the organisers' movement or their right to hold public meetings if they ignore warnings, but not by life imprisonment. Merely offending a section of society is not enough to ban a book or film; banning easily becomes a habit that harms freedom in the long run.