

On Being Free - Frithjof Bergmann

Primarily, this summary address the main themes of On Being Free which is written by **Frithjof Bergmann**, currently (Nov 2018) a Professor Emeritus at the University of Michigan in the philosophy department¹.

Freedom quickly becomes a description of **the process of self-expression** as Bergmann disassociates the related concepts of hindrances, obstacles, and democracy from Freedom. Bergmann considers 'true' freedom to be **self-expression**.² Meanwhile, **hindrances**, **obstacles**, and **democracy** may sometimes - depending on circumstances of the environment - contribute or detract from **self-expression**.

On a special note to automating one's understanding of an identification, the notion of an identification could be understood as a distance function between a new identification and the current set of existing identifications of a given self.

Identifications are culturally relative. In other words "there is no 'correct' identity - not even in the individual case. ... The slowly forming pattern is never simply right or wrong." (p. 98)
Identifications and identity can be good or bad, but those are subjective concepts.

An **obstacle** and a **hinderance** are simply types of **barriers**. While some are immovable and crushing, others may actually lead to a higher degree of harmony [read: synthesis in Hegelian terms]. Supported with Hegel's 'Master-Slave' dialectic, hindrances, obstacles, or even other people are akin to the Other, "that it is we and not the Other who benefit from this [other being/self]" (p. 109). Without the interdependence and constraints provided from other expressions, the self withers.³

¹ <https://lsa.umich.edu/philosophy/people/emeritus-faculty/fberg.html>

Professor Bergmann's interests include continental philosophy - especially Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Existentialism generally - and also social and political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and philosophy of culture. His *On Being Free* (1977) was issued in a paperback edition in 1978 and had twelve printings. Professor Bergmann founded the Center for New Work in Flint in 1981, and has developed a number of suggestions about work as a calling and a vehicle of self-realization, in rotation with mainstream employment, and involving a self-sufficiency that technology itself makes possible...

² "Freedom for us is the expression of what we are, of the qualities and characteristics we possess, but in an unpretentious sense: it is the expression of qualities which we identify... For us the phenomenon of identification is sufficient; if it is granted, then man can be free." (p.91)

³ "The self is extremely fragile; it can wither from sheer lack of use, a little dust can suffocate it. The problem of freedom is in large part the problem of how to keep the self alive, how to devise a mode of education and a society which do not extinguish it. ... What renders a man unfree is therefore not constraints - these are inevitable - but the increasing distance from, and the eventual loss of a foundation in himself. The less motivated and organic, the more arbitrary the controlling forces are, the less relationship they have to anything within the self and the more freedom is crushed." (p.97)

Formal institutions (including governments) based on **democracy** are effective and resilient due to a democracy's 'information spreading' characteristic: "democratic governments...as systems are more intelligent" (p. 195). Notice, though, that democratic institutions remain impartial to self-expression in terms of identifications. Properly built democratic institutions are built to spread information and create 'wisdom of the crowd' effects, whereas other institutions might be more or less suited to focus on improving self-expression.

Self-expression does not always correlate precisely with **democracy**, nor to **obstacles** and **hindrances** (as mentioned earlier).

Instead, the primary concluding themes of On Being Free describe self-expression as a goal at odds and in competition with 'wage slavery' (while not explicitly stated). Bergmann rejects the journey towards furthering work for a wage, and insists on reversing that trend. Ejecting the "tyranny of work... [or the] ... subordination of human life to work for wages" (p. 230) while braiding that ejection together with well-placed institutions and barriers would lead to a self-identifying and self-expressing society.⁴

In a striking parallel, it's not hard to see a similar tyranny in modern education. Contemporary school "is principally a training for further education [read: conformity]..., but all this time could be spent straightforwardly on the development of whatever talents or capacities this or that person has [as a self-identifying and self-expressing student]" (p. 145). The fractal of society rhymes within itself.

Targeting the educational system might seem like an obvious vector for improving freedom. A different possible initial step (broadly speaking) in bringing about a free society is to remove 'wage slavery.' Another could be towards applying this program/method/objective strictly to the individual (one at a time in an automated fashion) - meaning meeting their Maslovian needs.⁵ "[F]reedom becomes possible only after the fight over the bare necessities has stopped" (p. 102) and so freedom is clearly something that develops and crystallizes after other struggles end. Perhaps instead, the freedom 'chicken' can happen after the struggle solution 'hatches' (as odd as that analogy might seem). Alternatively, perhaps freedom is an inseparable part of the solution. On Being Free doesn't really provide us with a specific implementation.

There is a limit to freedom [in any case]. Absolute freedom is not only problematic, but is as impracticable, unrealistic, and often counterproductive to other worthy goals. Absolute freedom often

⁴ Obvious biases toward proper democratic organizations with the additionally useful obstacles and hindrances is implied, too, but these specifics aren't described. A rough implementation strategy that seems increasingly dated is also referenced near the end of the Freedom and Society chapter (ch. 7).

⁵ The individual could then become self-identifying and self-expressing, which might have been what Maslow was aiming to describe by self-actualization and transcendence.

leads to needless sacrifices of diminishing (and negative) returns. Bergmann describes numerous examples of grotesque freedom, but here are three examples:

- **'Open [Literal] Space'** in the Freedom and Education chapter (ch.6, p. 119) causes instructors to poorly instruct due to an overemphasis on the emotional care of students without consideration for intellectual rigor or creative inspiration for those students in their daily routines. Ironically, the instructor suffers as well, since their role as an instructor is neglected.
- **'The Missing Other'** in the Freedom and Education chapter (ch.6, p. 109) implies that the removal of a dialectical opposition occurs with isolation and lack of connectedness, ultimately leading to the withering of the self. In this kind of grotesque freedom, the self has no dialectical counterpart and lacks the necessary barriers to improve.
- **'Infinite Choices'** are implied on the last page of the Freedom and Choice chapter (ch.4, p. 78) and indicate a disassociated self in a realm where "an act can be unfree even if I [the self] did 'choose' it."

To elaborate even further, other goals ought to hang together with freedom, "[T]he concept of freedom...the attribute of expressing one's own self...is not the one thing above all that one should hope to give to one's own children, though it is one of the glorious possibilities of life." (p. 175) In fact, understanding the value of **barriers** assists us in providing a check on self-identifying and self-expressing. "So when it comes to obstacles...those that strengthen and enhance should be left alone." (p. 168)

If a free, self-expressing, self-identifying, society were to exist, then it would likely identify with some less free ideals due to its attempts at improving other worthy goals.

"The moral [of this thought-process] is not that we should do less, but that we should do something different, more exhilarating and more worthwhile." (p.214) Freedom⁶ is a good *Kantian Imperative* since it will likely be a valid and consistent end in itself. A society of self-identifying and self-expressing members is one that forms social technologies that augment and support future techniques of every discipline. That society also resists social viruses and parasites which seek to undermine freedom and replace it with grotesque impersonations. Undoubtedly, it has mechanisms for reproducing itself and mutating into better versions of itself which is especially useful for self-deprecation after it has served its purpose.

Foolishness would dictate using only On Being Free as a guide to solving *The Social Problem*.⁷ Yet, understanding the importance self-identification and self-expression and incorporating those ideas into a rigorous social science is vital.

⁶ "[O]ur position is still that the self develops out of congealing identifications, whose merit is inevitably relative, whose demarcation we can only guess at from faint indication, and whose expression is therefore always problematic. In short, we still hold to the stand that freedom [in the self-expression sense of the word] is not mere illusion, yet that it all the same is a most elusive and sometimes treacherous notion." (p. 133)

⁷ See: Philosophy and the Social Problem by Will Durant