



Friday Feature for October 23, 2020

Mars Hill Audio

Brad Littlejohn on the social context of freedom

Synopsis:

In a recent article examining the nature of freedom, **Brad Littlejohn** quotes moral philosopher Oliver O'Donovan: "Freedom is a term used almost exclusively to focus attention on the possibilities of its loss. Freedom is the looking glass in which we search our features anxiously for signs of 'unfreedom.'" Littlejohn argues that this nervousness about threats to freedom stems from the mistake of defining freedom solely in terms of "maximizing individual choice and minimizing interference, with the Right more prone to worry about the danger of government coercion, and the Left the danger of oppressive social norms." In this *Friday Feature*, Littlejohn talks with Ken Myers about the necessity of a more expansive understanding of freedom, one which recognizes that we are really only free within the social experience of shared meaning and mutual recognition.

Transcript

Ken Myers

This is the *Friday Feature* for October 23rd. I'm Ken Myers.

On Volume 142 of the *Journal*, I claimed that one of the most urgent tasks facing the church in light of the various challenges that we confront was a recovery of an adequate understanding of freedom.

Not long after that volume was published, Mars Hill Audio very happily hosted a lecture by philosopher D. C. Schindler, titled "For Freedom Set Free: Retrieving Genuine Religious Liberty." In his lecture, Schindler looked at how in the Christian tradition the understanding of freedom combined theological, philosophical, and political concerns that were taken from Hebrew, Greek, and Roman sources.

In an article published back in August examining the nature of freedom, Brad Littlejohn quoted moral philosopher Oliver O'Donovan, who commented on the unfortunate fate of much thinking and talking about freedom in modern

societies. Freedom, writes O'Donovan, "is a term used exclusively to focus attention on the possibilities of its loss. Freedom is the looking glass in which we search our features anxiously for signs of unfreedom."

In his article, Brad Littlejohn argued that this nervousness about potential threats to freedom stems from the mistake of defining freedom solely in terms of "maximizing individual choice and minimizing interference, with the right more prone to worry about the danger of government coercion and the left the danger of oppressive social norms."

I talked with Brad Littlejohn about the history of the idea of freedom on Volume 139 of the *Journal*. On that occasion I interviewed him about his book, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker, The Puritans, and Protestant Political Theology*. In that book, among other things, he argued that early modern views of freedom were often expressed in terms of a commitment to the freedom of conscience. And conscience was understood by all parties as a pointer to a higher moral law, not the warrant for unaccountable, self-authenticating moral autonomy. Conscience was assumed to be an inner sense of duty to act in accordance with an objective moral order, not the autonomous capacity to assert one's personal and arbitrary sense of what's right or wrong.

As Littlejohn wrote in the opening chapter of that book, if conscience is not assumed to be "oriented towards some universal law, an appeal to liberty of conscience seems to be a call for the disintegration of society into an interminable conflict of myriad self-justifying preferences." That's from his book, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty*.

In this recent article, Brad Littlejohn is also concerned with the relationship between freedom and social cohesion but from a slightly different angle, about which I talked with him earlier this week. And we'll get to that crucial point about the social nature of freedom in just a minute.

But first, early in our conversation I asked Littlejohn to explain a subtle point in his article, inspired by Oliver O'Donovan's discussion of freedom. O'Donovan tersely defines freedom as the "capacity for meaningful action." Freedom is not simply the absence of external constraints on action or the availability of

virtually infinite possibilities for action. “Capacity for meaningful action” implies more than those conditions. Brad Littlejohn.

Brad Littlejohn

In theory, if an infinite number of options are available to me, but I’m physically paralyzed, then they’re not really available to me, so you have to have the capacity to act. And that train of thought leads to not merely physical capacity, but moral capacity. And this is where I think the Christian tradition has emphasized — not just the Christian tradition, the classical tradition, right — that the cultivation of virtues is actually part and parcel of freedom, because if your soul is disordered by passions then you’re not actually able to experience freedom.

So that’s I think in the background, but that’s actually not what I focus on so much in this essay, where the idea of meaningful action — what I’m getting at here is we inevitably experience freedom in a social context. I think the movie *Castaway* is a great picture of, you know, here’s a guy who technically has all kinds of freedom. He’s alone on a desert island, no one can get in his way and at the beginning, there’s a certain enjoyment of that freedom. But, ultimately, to be able to act apart from the presence of other human beings before whom our actions have meaning is not experienced as freedom at all. It’s experienced as a form of paralysis. So we need a social context.

And then the final thing is we don’t just need people around, like spectators, but we need the existence of social norms. Social norms are there to give us some sense of the meaning of our actions. If we have no idea how other people around us are going to react when we act in a certain way, then we’re going to feel very nervous and constrained. It’s when you’ve sort of mastered the rules of your surrounding that you actually feel empowered and free to act meaningfully within it.

KM

The capacity for meaningful action known as freedom is only intelligible or recognizable — it’s only really experienced — within a social setting. Littlejohn argues that both the left and the right tend to neglect or minimize the social dimensions of freedom, having acquiesced to some version of John Stuart Mill’s idea of the sovereign individual. And Littlejohn argues that freedom —

having the capacity for meaningful action — is threatened when the shared framework of moral meaning lacks durability, when it's not consistent. As he writes, "Freedom can only be preserved in social forms that offer some resilience against the sudden redefinition of what is and is not lawful, whether by one tyrant ten thousand miles away or ten thousand tyrants one mile away."

BL

There has to be some persistence in what those around you name as good and name as evil for you to know how you're supposed to act in that situation, and when that starts to be up for grabs and things start changing rapidly — this is a line I do quote from O'Donnell, and he says that — when there's a breakdown of the structures of communication within which we learn to act, we feel ourselves hurled into a vacuum, he says. And I think that's a really good way of understanding some of the chaos that we've seen here in the last few months. I think it's about a sense of alienation from a shared context of meaning that's driving so much unrest on both left and right.

KM

And in the absence of predictable standards of meaning and of morality, those standards which are in place — today — seem increasingly to be arbitrary and thus tyrannical.

BL

That idea of arbitrariness is actually what is at the heart of so much of our political tradition's reflections on the nature of tyranny. I think nowadays we often use the word tyranny to speak of too great of an extension of authority, the government trying to control too much of our lives, or whatever.

But historically when those in the Western political tradition talked about tyranny, what they were most concerned about was this idea of arbitrariness, or this idea of — it wasn't so much the *extent* of what the rulers controlled, it was the fact that you never knew whether what was approved today was going to be vilified tomorrow and vice versa. And so that sense of living in a regime of instability where the *meaning* of your actions, not necessarily the scope of your actions, but the meaning of your action, is dependent on the whims — or at least *feels* dependence on the whims — of those that you have no control over,

I think that's the experience of tyranny. I think that can happen even in a very *laissez-faire* society.

KM

And the experience of that tyranny, you also make the point — at some point I think you reference Mill — that tyranny can be exercised not just by government but by society. The surrounding social order can be tyrannical. And after you cite a piece that Matthew Crawford wrote where he talked about this permanent revolution in social norms, which characterizes the “wokeness” of our moment. But you point out that that actually reflects a kind of logic in modern commercial culture, in capitalism, where something that was regarded as sophisticated one year is regarded as dowdy the next year — so the logic of fashion.

BL

Yeah, I think that is a key part of this — and this is something I'm indebted to Hannah Arendt for in *The Human Condition* — is getting at this idea that the market economy requires reducing the durable to the consumable, reducing the permanent to the transient, right? If you're going to sell more and more and more year after year, then you have to make people dissatisfied with what they currently have. You gotta tell them the iPhone 7's no good; maybe get the iPhone 8, iPhone 9, and so on.

Paradigmatically, I think as you say with fashion, with clothing, this relates to social norms and that the purpose of clothing is as a sort of social signifier, and the meaning of that signifier changes when the fashion changes completely. And so you thought you were wearing something that, as you say, communicates sophistication. But now it communicates how out of touch you are. So I think we've kind of imbibed that logic as a society, that we expect to be constantly swapping out all these extensions of ourselves, at least, and constantly adjusting to a change in the meaning of all these things that we wear and that we use.

And so I think what we're seeing — really, we've been seeing it goes quite a way back, I mean, the Sexual Revolution is the 1960s and we're just seeing kind of “Sexual Revolution 2.0” in the last fifteen, twenty years perhaps — but the extension of that logic to our bodies themselves, right? That our bodies

themselves should be as easily able to be sort of swapped out for a new meaning as the things that we put on them.

KM

Our bodies and also what is regarded as — I hesitate to use the word *virtuous* — what is regarded as a good way of relating our bodies to other bodies also shifts.

BL

Exactly. Exactly. So, we talk about “virtue signaling.” Societies have always virtue signaled — that’s nothing new. Whether you believe in virtue or not, most people have desired to present themselves as virtuous and to speak and act in ways that convey that. I think what’s created so much anxiety around the idea of virtue-signaling now is this sense that the virtues being signaled seem so arbitrary and so rapidly changing, and people are signaling as virtue something that two years ago would have been seen as vice.

KM

I got an e-mail recently from one of our listeners, who pointed out that I often make reference — and people I interview often make reference — to the idea of the *common good*, and they ask for some useful readings, you know, they wanted a bibliography on things to read about the common good. About two thirds of the way into the article [you] talk about the idea of a “participation in a genuinely common good rather than mere collaboration in shared private goods.” Maybe you could connect the dots between freedom and the common good. You’ve already implied it, but maybe using the language of the common good maybe you could reiterate what you’ve already said.

BL

Right. So the distinction I’m getting at there — mere collaboration and shared private goods — the idea there would be a good that you can enjoy on your own, and perhaps by working with other people you can more efficiently get more of that good that’s something you can enjoy on your own. But the working with other people is, as it were, not strictly necessary to the enjoyment of the good.

And I think that's how we've kind of trained ourselves to think: that we are each out in pursuit of various forms of individual pleasure and fulfillment.

Whereas the idea of the common good, I give the example of an orchestra is the idea of a good that is only actually achievable as more than the sum of its parts, a good that is only achievable in shared action, in which the private goods that each of us pursue are taken up into something larger that we can only achieve in community.

And where that gets in with my idea of freedom is, if freedom is a capacity for meaningful action, as I've argued, then some of the most meaningful — perhaps I would say *the* most meaningful — kinds of actions that we can participate in are those that transcend our individuality, that are those in which we speak, as I said, of the first person plural rather than the first person singular.

And so I think the bind that we put ourselves in [in] modern society is — what I've described about freedom is just an existential reality of how we actually experience the world. I think when we are deprived of context for shared action in pursuit of common goods, we experience that, in fact, as a loss of freedom.

KM

As Littlejohn writes in his article, “I need other people to whom I can give an account of myself, before whom I can represent my deeds as meaningful. If we have no context within which to act, or no way to express the meaning of what we do, a paralyzing sense of futility smothers our freedom. It is this social dimension of freedom that has, I think, been sorely neglected in our own day, with devastating results.”

Brad Littlejohn is a visiting assistant professor of political theory at Patrick Henry College, a senior fellow in the Edmund Burke Foundation, and president of the Davenant Institute. The article we were discussing is titled “Individual and National Freedom: Toward a New Conservative Fusion,” and it was published in *American Affairs*, a quarterly journal of public policy and political thought. The journal is online at americanaffairsjournal.org.

Littlejohn was a guest on Volume 139 of the *Journal*. Then he talked about his book *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker, The Puritans, and Protestant Political Theology*. Earlier this summer he wrote an article called “No Wealth But Life: Moral Reasoning in a Pandemic.” I had the pleasure of reading and recording that article as one of our *Friday Features*, which you can still hear on our app.

Next week I’ll have a tribute to Thomas Howard, who died last week at the age of 85. That’s all for now. I’m Ken Myers.