



ON FREE WILL

by Muktananda

In my view, free will and free speech are inextricably linked. So, what do they have in common? Both are “modern era” ideas. They did not exist in the “pre-modern era.” The pre-modern worldview was characterized by myth, superstition and medieval thinking. Pre-modern cultures do not possess a sense of distinct individuality. They saw themselves as indistinguishable from the tribe of which they are a part. In other words, in the pre-modern worldview there is no conscious awareness of a self as existing in and of itself. Rather, it holds that I am my caste; I am my class; I am my tribe; I am my extended family. Without the tribe, I am no one – I have no individual self. This is a difficult concept to grasp since most 21st century humans no longer embody this pre-modern state of being.

The pre-modern world was governed by kings, popes, emperors and the like, all of whom took for granted that they ruled by divine fiat. It was a world of nobles and lords who ruled over populaces of uneducated subjects, be they serfs or peasants or the obedient faithful. It was a caste system and within it everyone knew his or her place. The idea of “free will” never arose. In fact, it wasn’t even conceivable. In India, enlightenment was limited to the Brahman caste. The Brahmans are designated as the priestly class who serve as pundits, gurus or acharya. Enlightenment had nothing to do with free will. You were either born into the Brahman caste or you weren’t - and that was dictated by your karma.

THE MODERN WORLDVIEW

The modern worldview evolved in the mid-17th century as a way of addressing the chaos and superstitions of the pre-modern world, which is why it is referred to as the *Age of Enlightenment* or the *Age of Reason*. The transition from pre-modernism to modernity began when scientific methods were developed based upon empirical observation as distinct from

the historic use of reason or innate knowledge. Galileo and Newton are rightly credited with shifting pre-modern thinking away from attaining wisdom that would deepen and enrich a person's connection to the cosmos. Instead, they promoted an understanding of people and things by explaining physical phenomena in terms of fundamental laws. It was in this context that concepts of free will and free speech arose.

Why did the Founding Fathers build in certain limitations to the US constitution designed to protect free speech? To understand why, we need to go back to our origins. Elites are never completely homogenous and are rarely all on the same page. When the American Revolution was declared, it had the support of only about a third of the population. Another third was against it. And the other third had better things to think about. At the crucial battle of Yorktown, Virginia, there were about as many Americans fighting for England as for the colonies. In fact, the battle was decided by foreigners, not by Americans. The French navy, under the Comte de Grasse, blockaded the Chesapeake, cutting off supplies to English forces.

The American elites of 1776, who wanted to break away from Britain, were outsiders. That is, they were rebels defying the authority of the entrenched elite. Naturally, they wanted to be able to say what they thought, without being labeled as traitors and hanged. So, they favored "free speech." But so were ideas of liberty, free trade, and social evolution very much in the "air du temps." Both Adam Smith's *"The Wealth of Nations"* and Charles Darwin's *"The Origin of the Species"* were published in 1776. These "liberal" ideas caused them to have faith in the common sense of the masse with their folk wisdom and traditional values. Besides, they needed "The People" to win the revolution.

THE POST-MODERN WORLDVIEW

Today, we live in the post-modern era. The term "post-modernism" first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979 with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard. Post-modernism contends the world is not just a perception, but also an interpretation. Thus, the great discovery of post-modernism according to Ken Wilber is that nothing is pre-given. Its approach to knowing may be characterized as epistemological pluralism in that it embraces multiple ways of knowing. You will find a mixture of pre-modern revelation and modern empiricism and reason combined with intuition, feeling, relational and spiritual ways of knowing. Nevertheless, it rejects the objectivist view of the world as

espoused by modernism. Instead, it contends that knowledge is not objective, but rather an interpretation made by an observer. Thus, today elite deciders believe they are no longer at the mercy of “old wives tales” or constitutions. Like Donald Trump, they think they can make up their own rules as they go.

The key to understanding the future of the USA, and why it is doomed, is to realize that “The People” and “the deciders” are not the same. Mancur Olson described the important difference in his book, *The Logic of Collective Action*. It tells us why the US government has gotten so big and so out-of-step with “The People.” In short, the support for more government – laws, regulations, subsidies, bailouts, stimmys, and the like – is always very limited and focused. Some people – those who get the money – have a keen interest in making sure new programs, whatever they are, go ahead. The public, on the other hand, is usually unaware of what is going on. And if you explained it, most likely, it would be against it or simply uninterested.

A public policy might deliver one billion dollars to a small group of arms suppliers, for example, to “aid the Ukraine.” Explain that to the average man or woman. If the program goes forward, it will cost him about \$3.03. He’s not going to get too animated about that. He doesn’t really know where the Ukraine is; he has no idea of its history or of what led to the war. And helping the Ukraine to “protect its freedom” sounds vaguely like a good thing. But while the common man is ignorant or indifferent, the insiders who will get the money are well informed and keenly interested. The program could change their lives. Naturally, they’ll hire lobbyists, make campaign contributions to key members of Congress, and make sure everyone realizes that this is a matter of vital national importance.

THINKING CONSCIOUSLY

So, in our post-modern world how does one exercise free will without the ability to think consciously? Most people have never learned how to think consciously. What many regard as thinking, is to me little more than regurgitating embodied prejudices – unreflected thoughts based upon unconscious assumptions about the worldview in which they are immersed. When someone challenges us to “think outside the box” they are, in effect, asking us to think outside that taken-for-granted worldview and about which they are cognitively blind (i.e. they don’t know that they don’t know). Consequently, they are prone to false certainties, entrenched positions and pissing-matches as they descend the rhetorical

pyramid into ad homonyms, or opt into this or that Facebook group or Twitter feeds to weigh in on QAnon's latest conspiracy theories? How can anyone make meaning in the midst of magical thinking and utopian ideologies?

At the end of the day, we are all the result of our individual and collective programming whether we are living in the pre-modern, modern, or post-modern eras. The possibility of exercising free will was borne in the modern era and it still exists today **IF** we learn to think consciously and have the courage of our convictions. Without that, we are nothing more than puppets on a string dancing to the beliefs and convictions of others. In other words, we have abdicated our right to exercise our free will.

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