

THE FREEDOM CONSPIRACY

Freedom is one of our highest values in Western society. And we define our freedom in a very specific way. We define it in terms of the individual against the structures and institutions of society. In other words, we define freedom as the ability to do whatever we want regardless of what any other authority may want to impose on us. We can easily justify this as we perceive authority to be inherently corrupt and irrelevant, and therefore disqualified from interfering with our choices.

At this point we catch a faint whiff of selfishness. This is hardly surprising as we've just defined ourselves as God. So we add an ethical clause: 'As long as it doesn't harm anyone else'. Of course, we see this clause as self-evident and of minimal inconvenience. We press on without further thought. Further thought would, of course, confront us with the uncomfortable reality that the culture that has presented us with this definition of freedom is built upon the exploitation of the developing world. If we were to apply our ethical clause, we would have to deconstruct the very society that makes possible our definition of freedom.

So our definition of freedom is freedom to do whatever we want and our ethical clause is more to make us feel good about ourselves rather than something we intend to apply in any rigorous way. But what if our definition of freedom is actually the invisible chain that keeps us bound? That would be extremely ironic, the conspiracy of conspiracies.

The move that blind sides us is this: we believe that our desires define us. I've been taught that my expression of my desires is what makes me me. But this is a trap. My desires are not half as much me as I think they are. My desires are a weird mix of hormones, good intentions, insecurities, hopes, lusts and beliefs and ideas I've picked up, mostly unconsciously, from the people and culture around me. My desires are incessantly being trained and seduced by companies through the media to make me more susceptible to buy their products. They ruthlessly exploit my hopes, fears and insecurities in order to incline me to spend money. Thus their most effective marketing strategy becomes my desires. If we equate our freedom with the ability to express our desires, it should make us more than a little suspicious that so many people seem to want to spend over £500 on an iPhone.

Since our desires are so often the play thing of forces that we rarely recognise, true freedom must transcend our desires and requires both awareness and discipline. To maintain our freedom requires us to be free to say no to our desires where we recognise that our desires are in fact leading us into slavery. This is not high philosophy. Any alcoholic knows exactly what this means. Since so many of our desires are either indisciplined impulses or the product of hopes, fears and insecurities manipulated by the media, true freedom requires character. True freedom requires us to become people of love, freed from the blind slavery of our own selfish desires and instead serving others.

However, it's difficult to answer the classic postmodern response to this: If this is true freedom, I think I'm quite happy with slavery. If we're happy with the illusion of freedom rather than the reality then this option is easily available to us in our i-universe of one. For a very reasonable monthly instalment. Minimum contract of 18 months. Terms and conditions apply.