Where Does My Freedom Lie?

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Freedom is generally considered a desirable feature of human life: its absence or restriction is often deplored. Yet under certain circumstances it may be considered a burden. What is the source of freedom in our lives? Where do the constraints on it come from? What attitudes might we adopt toward both our freedom of choice and the constraints on it? In this article the resources of Descriptive Psychology are brought to bear on the practical issues raised by these questions.

Where Does My Freedom Lie?

This article arose from the following personal contemplation: Here I am, living in a world that appears to be at least partly of my own making. Where did it come from? How much of it is my own doing? How much is someone else's? Whose? How can I change it for the better? What help can I expect? From where?

The scientific education of one of the authors did not equip him well for addressing such questions. The world as portrayed in the context of physical science is overwhelmingly deterministic, allowing little if any latitude for the representation, let alone the fact, of its being changed by the individual person (Holbach, 2002, Honderich, 2002). In contrast, the discipline of Descriptive Psychology (Ossorio, 1982/1998, Shideler, 1988) provides a different set of intellectual resources. The articulation of the Descriptive Psychology (DP) concept of person includes the concept of deliberate action -- behavior consciously *chosen*. DP also provides a concept of (behavioral) world -- the totality of states of affairs available to be acted upon. This concept will facilitate the task of dealing with the many different worlds of individuals and communities that are of direct relevance to our inquiry. (More about the concepts of person, deliberate action, and world later.)

Here is the plan for our contemplation:

1. Look at where my freedom lies and where it does not, thereby revealing what in my world is of my own making.

2. Look at the contributions to my world made by the communities to which I belong.

3. Explore the opportunities and challenges that arise from our ability, in today's world, to engage in multi-community behavior.

1. Where Does My Freedom Lie?

In DP, a central aspect of the concept of person is that the person stands in three important relationships to his behavior:

- That of Actor -- he engages in the behavior directly
- That of Observer -- he observes and describes the behavior
- That of Critic -- he judges the behavior as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and makes adjustments accordingly.

Ossorio (Ossorio, 1982/1998, pp104-105) puts it this way:

"A person has a status in the world as an Actor, as an Observer, and as a Critic

a. For the Actor, the World is essentially an arena for action, and he treats it accordingly by incorporating it into his actions. Acting as Actor has several distinctive features.

1. His behavior is spontaneous; he does what comes naturally. (What he does is an expression of his character and is not directly problematic.)

2. His behavior is creative rather than reflective. His behavior and its products are a significant expression of himself and not merely a common or conventional response to a situation, though it may be that, too.

3. His behavior is value-*giving* rather than value-finding. Creating the behavior involves creating a framework of interrelated statuses (and their corresponding values) of which mundane particulars are embodiments.

4. His behavior is a before-the-fact phenomenon, since he creates it (he is not *finding out* what behavior he is engaged in—he is *doing* it).

b. For the Observer/Describer, the world is something to be recognized as being *this* way rather than some other way. Archetypally, the Observer/Describer acts as "one of us", since recognizing the world as X rather than Y paraphrases into "That's what *we call* 'X'." What behavior it is is known after the fact.

c. For the Appraiser, or Critic, the world is either satisfactory or unsatisfactory in a given respect. If it is satisfactory, it is satisfying. If it is unsatisfactory, it warrants a diagnosis of its being unsatisfactory in *this* way rather than *that* way. Even more important is the prescription given for trying to improve matters by acting *this* way rather than that. Failures in self control associated with poor critic functioning are at the root of many psychopathologies."

This picture of the A-O-C positions available to a person lays out her basic freedoms and opportunities for creation. In particular, item a.3 reminds us *that, in addition to the mundane particulars, the meanings and values acted out in the person's life drama are also part of the actor's creation.* For example, if I present a position paper at a town meeting, I am not choosing merely to present a paper, but also to take a personal position on a matter of public interest, to exercise my eligibility as a community member to do so, to risk generating disagreement, to value my position strongly enough to take that risk, etc.

What place do freedom and creativity have in the conceptual structure of DP*?* Note that right from the beginning, in A-O-C, freedom of choice

and creation of one's behavior are the baseline. They do not call for explanation. Things that *do* call for explanation are the constraints on (a) a person's freedom of choice and on (b) his ability to create his behavior, and along with it, his world.

Some explanation of the DP concept of world is in order. The word "world" does not mean the planet Earth, as it might to a geologist, or any planet, as it might to an astronomer, or even the physical universe, as it might to a cosmologist. Instead the usage is more accurately represented by "the world of baseball", or "the world of high fashion", or even "the world of science". In each of these worlds there are persons: baseball players and fans, fashion models and buyers, and scientists, respectively; in each of these worlds there are the "done" things; the values; the principles; and of course the physical objects: balls and bats, dresses, laboratory instruments. Each of these (behavioral) worlds contains all the concepts, logical distinctions, and facts that any of its participants might take into consideration when choosing his or her actions as a participant in that world. And so it is with individuals: my world is the one that has a place for me in it, and it contains all the concepts, logical distinctions, and facts that I might take into consideration when choosing my actions. If I were to write an historical novel about England's King Henry V, I would attempt to immerse myself and my readers in the world of Henry, to the best of my understanding of that world. But I could never live in that world myself: I can only live in my own 21st century world and look back on what little I could glean from the historical record of the world in which Henry actually lived.

How much of this world of mine lies beyond my ability to change? How much of our worlds do we get to choose, and how much is a given? For starters there are the physical constraints. Human beings cannot flap their arms and fly to the moon. Our planet, as lovely as it is, is racked with storms, fires, earthquakes, and plagues; human bodies are frequently crippled or destroyed by these natural events. We are stuck, as a race, with all the ills the flesh is heir to. The second great source of real constraints is our society. Each person has a certain position, consisting of a certain set of eligibilities. Eligibilities constitute the alternative behaviors in which I

have the option to engage. One's position does not "cause" or force one to do anything, but it does mark how one's behavior will count — both to the self and to members of one's community. Actions attempted without the requisite eligibilities, e.g. "I now pronounce you husband and wife", when spoken by someone without the appropriate authority, do not count. Attempts to evade social constraints by becoming a hermit fail because the freedom gained by not bumping into others is more than cancelled out by the lack of opportunity to engage in human social practices. ("A person requires a community in order for it to be possible for him to engage in human behavior at all" — Ossorio, 1998, pp.75-76) Furthermore we choose our actions taking into consideration our worlds *as we see them*, and we sometimes make mistakes, such as under or over estimating a physical limitation, misperceiving a relationship, misunderstanding community norms or practices, etc.

The physical and social limitations and the shortcomings of our perceptions are, in the short run, inescapable. Over time, though, both kinds of constraints are subject to change, albeit perhaps slowly, through a variety of mechanisms. Ways that these constraints can be changed, deliberately or otherwise, include:

- Physical world: empirical discovery, inventions
- Personal history: education, experience, training
- Embodiment (one's body): aging, accidents, diet, exercise
- Communities: accreditation or degradation, joining, participating
- Misperceptions: hard knocks, education, psychotherapy

For example, some physical constraints can be removed over time. Mountaineers can condition themselves to breathe more effectively at high altitude, persons with aging bodies can undertake hatha yoga to preserve and enhance strength and flexibility, many disabilities can be countered with prosthetics such as glasses and hearing aids. Social constraints can often be modified through application of DP's relationship change formula.

The *Relationship Change Formula* is stated: *"Relationships follow behavior. That is, if a person C, has a relationship, R, to Z, and if C's behavior with respect to Z is such that it violates R and expresses RR, then C's relationship to Z will change in the direction of RR"* (Ossorio, 1982/1998, p68). That is, if I were to act *as if* a certain relationship were the case, things would move toward making that relationship indeed the case. One's relationship is changed when the respect or trust of another is earned or destroyed. People can learn new competencies and thereby qualify for new eligibilities, as when a lawyer passes the bar exam and gets to practice law. And the relationship change formula applies even to one's way of *seeing* things. My relationship to spiders or snakes, for example, might be changed by eliminating fear through desensitization. This example reveals the possibility of even changing an emotional reaction through a process of experiential education. The removal of misperceptions via psychotherapy is also noteworthy. As a simple example, a person who is preoccupied with what it takes to make more and more money might discover in the course of therapy that there is more to life. That would constitute an expansion in his world, and with it a larger arena for action. See (Bergner, 1998) and (Roberts, 1985).

But wait! Let's not get too preoccupied with constraints. They are, after all, like the boundary lines on a tennis court—something we need to stay within—not something that prevents one from making an almost infinite variety of shots in the game. There is still the court itself, the arena where we get to play. You are still the *author* of your own life. *We all do a lot of creating that is not noticed just because it is so commonplace.* Simple example: facts that you get to make true just by pronouncing them. E.g., "This sketch is of Winston Churchill" (whether or not it be an accurate likeness) or "I intend to be a musician" or, as a boss can say, "You're hired." This last case exemplifies both a constraint (you need to be the boss to do it), and the freedom of choice (you can hire or not).

To get a feel for the depth of the domain in which personal authorship is exercised, we have the concept of the *significance of one's actions.* In Descriptive Psychology, the significance of a behavior is given by answering the question: "What are you doing by doing that?" For example, by eat-

ing lunch I might be keeping my body functioning well, by keeping my body functioning well I might be preparing it for service in some cause, and so on. Thus associated with any action we can generate a *significance series* of descriptions, in which you move up the series by asking "What are you doing by doing that?", and down the series by asking "How?" Any time one embarks upon a course of action, the action chosen includes the entire significance series. If the significance of my eating lunch were different, for example to schmooze with a business associate, that would make it a different action, one that involves a business relationship in addition to nutrition.

Although the physical particulars of an event are subject to public scrutiny and scientific verification, even the first step up in significance often involves a less visible choice, the actor's and other's, and, as we proceed higher in significance, it often becomes more and more of a private matter. (That is why, in the popular literature, "inner", as in "inner life" or "inner wisdom", often equates to "higher significance".) Understanding someone's behavior, whether in a story or a play or in real life, typically includes being able to elaborate the significance series of the behavior some steps in either direction.

An example, from Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar", of the freedom to assign significance is the funeral oration for Julius Caesar following Caesar's assassination by Brutus and his co-conspirators. The assassination was public knowledge: Its significance was not. Was it the removal of a despot, or an act of despicable treachery? In his oration, Caesar's friend Marc Antony did not attempt to change any of the events surrounding Caesar's death. Nevertheless he did, through his skill at oratory, sway his listeners from whatever their views were of the significance of the event to his own: that it was a case of treacherous murder. This example is illuminating: The physical particulars of an event are often indisputable matters of public record. What the participants were doing by doing what they did is open to creative interpretation by commentators, and to first hand authorship by the participants themselves. In other words, *When choosing an action, you get to choose all its levels of significance, not just its mundane particulars.* For example, when you choose to walk around a large expanse of grass

repeatedly hitting a little white ball into one hole after another, you are not just choosing these mundane physical actions, you are choosing to play golf, and if the game is with your boss, you are choosing something of additional significance. If one intentionally loses at golf to one's boss, it is a different behavior than if one tries one's best to win.

An important special case of assigning significance is the *casting* of individuals into roles in our world: friend, enemy, lover, mentor, colleague, etc. Creation of actions, their significance, and the story of which those actions are a part is world *creation* because "a Person's world equals the totality of all states of affairs that person is prepared to act on" (Ossorio, 1982/1998, pp. 25-26), and the casting of individuals and the authorship of the story implicitly creates such facts. In the course of life:

- You discover the constraints,
- you create the behaviors and all that goes with them—significance, coherence/wholeness, elegance of the story,
- via the relationship change formula (and other phenomena) the facts and constraints change, and
- this process continues lifelong.

An interesting feature of creating your own story or life drama is that, just as you cannot *not* act, you cannot *not* give value, nor refrain from assigning significance either. Whatever you refuse to do is itself a choice that involves values and assignment of significance, and contributes to your personal story. We are indebted to Jim Holmes for the following poetic perspective on this last principle:

"Jose Ortega Y Gasset coined the phrase 'compulsory freedom.' What he said went something like this: Every moment of every day (waking moment?) you must choose what it is that you are to do. There is no way out of choosing since even choosing to stand still is to choose what it is you are to do. You have to choose to stand up, get a drink, scratch an itch, ride a bike, make love, argue a point, and so forth. The compulsory part is that you must choose. The freedom part is that there is nothing that

says what that choice has to be. One may choose death before dishonor. In that freedom, lies the creativity of persons in how they construct their histories. And in that freedom lies the ultimate, terrifying and yet awesome responsibility that persons have for their lives. It is also out of that freedom that persons can change their histories." (J. Holmes, personal communication).

As Yogi Berra might have put it: *"You can't get away from freedom."*

2. What do Communities Contribute to My World?

The baseline is the Maxim E1 quoted previously: "A person requires a community in order for it to be possible for him to engage in human behavior at all." (Ossorio, 1982/1998, pp. 75-76). Thus a community provides the potential for action. In the light of our discussion so far, you have a great deal of latitude in the creation of your own actions, relationships, significances, and personal story. This latitude is still bounded by whether you can, in some community, successfully treat the world in the new way.

For example, these observations provide at least a logical antidote for someone "stuck in victim." Whatever the current or even the past physical or social calamity, it is grist for a drama that is still being written (or rewritten), and subject to assignment, even ex post facto, of a significance that is newly created. As an extreme example, consider Dr. Viktor Frankl (Frankl, 1959). After being sent to the death camps of the holocaust, where he was one of very few members of his family to survive, he became one of Europe's leading psychiatrists. His innovations in psychiatry were based on his experiences in the camps, where he had been forced, day by day and against the worst possible odds, to create meaning in his life sufficient to survive.

3. What Opportunities and Challenges Arise from Living in Multiple Communities?

A person's world is always subject to reformulation. This may happen in a small way by acquiring a new fact or in a sweeping way as in a religious conversion. In the same way, a shared world is also subject to refor-

mulation, but only with the consensus of the community. Considerable latitude in the creation and subsequent reconstruction of one's world is the birthright of every person. This birthright may well bring with it "insurmountable opportunities." Various communities offer the individual pre-packaged worlds, with room for customization, and perhaps facilities for connecting with the worlds of other communities. For example, most religious communities offer a variety of spiritual practices: prayer, meditation, sacraments; many choice principles: non-violence, charity, mutual support; and several positions for the individual: parishioner, usher, minister, monk. Within broad limits, it is up to the individual to choose her mix of practices, how to embody the principles, and to which positions to aspire.

Now we must ask: What are the basic challenges each individual faces in acquiring and maintaining a world that she wants to live in? What negotiations are needed in order to provide for compatibility among potentially competing communities? What are the implications for multiculturalism? These issues are particularly pressing with respect to communities that have a stake in ultimate significance—religions. "People construct and maintain worlds that give them behavior potential, and routinely try to reconstruct those worlds in ways that give them more potential." (Roberts, 1985, pp.50-51). In other words:

Individuals and communities create worlds (including behaviors, social practices, and significances) in which meaningful and satisfying lives are possible, given the reality constraints faced by those individuals and communities.

There are many examples of this sort of creation: The human race inhabits a planet that features volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, fires, and epidemics. Sudden death or injury from these events has always been a possibility. Our communities have therefore created worlds, including practices and significance, with which the community can embrace these disasters and go on. Similarly, we as individuals are confronted with the physical constraint of our own death, and are called upon to create our worlds in such a way that eventual death does not negate the significance

of what we are doing day to day. Certain cases of depression and other pathologies can productively be viewed as perceived failures at this creative task (Bergner, 1998).

Certain cultures have been created in the presence of daunting physical environments: the Sahara desert, the highlands of Tibet, Patagonia, the Aleutian islands, and northern Greenland. Indeed, if you are born into one of those cultures and learn the normal social practices and values of that culture, your physical environment, hostile to others, becomes friendly to you (Stefansson, 1969). These examples show how far a culture can go in helping its members to create a behavioral world that is in harmony with their physical environment.

Historical developments also influence what a culture or society contributes to the worlds of its members. The United States in the 21st century is in some respects unique in history in its success as a large-scale multi-cultural society.

To some degree or another, social groups meet a person's basic human needs. As a reference point for further discussion, consider the following typical (not exhaustive) list of basic human needs (Aylesworth and Ossorio, 1983, pp 45-94).

1. Physical Health
2. Safety and Security
3. Self-esteem and Worth
4. Love and Affiliation
5. Agency and Autonomy
6. Adequacy and Competence
7. Identity
8. Belonging and Acceptance
9. Disengagement
10. Order, Understanding, Predictability
11. Personal and Social Legitimacy

12. Meaning, Hope, Significance

A *culture* is a community that meets the additional requirement of comprehensiveness: it provides a rich enough array of statuses and social practices that its members have the opportunity to meet *all* of their basic human needs. A *religion* is a community, often extending over a long time and a wide geographical range, all of whose members and activities are in principle infused with spirituality (Shideler, 1992, p.29), thereby addressing the needs for self-esteem and worth; identity; order, understanding, and predictability; and meaning, hope, and significance. A *society* is typically a community that controls a politically distinct geographical area, and whose mission is harmonious life together, mutual defense, and allocation of natural resources (Lubuguin, 1998).

Early in human history, primarily due to geographic isolation, all societies were also cultures. A distinctive feature of the United States as a society is that it took a minimalist approach to basic human needs, probably to encourage immigration, minimize government, and preserve religious freedom. This minimalist approach addressed the needs for physical health; safety and security; agency and autonomy; adequacy and competence; and personal and social legitimacy; and explicitly avoided some of the others, especially meaning, hope and significance (Gaustadt, 1993). The up side of this choice was that it made a multi-cultural society *possible* although not necessarily easy. The down side was that it made one *necessary.* That is, *each citizen needed one or more other communities to provide the statuses and practices for meeting the remaining basic human needs*. Indeed, United States society has taken a good deal of flak for crassness and sterility, i.e. not strongly supporting those other basic human needs, especially those involving meaning and significance. It might be defended on the grounds that it was never designed to do this. (These historical considerations may shed some light on the higher level of religious commitment and activism is the United States compared to Europe. Societies with stronger grounding in a single religion provide (a) fewer unmet needs for the individual to confront, and (b) a clearer authority against which to rebel.)

Since the society of the USA does not automatically meet the basic

human needs for self-esteem and worth; identity; belonging and acceptance; disengagement; order, understanding, predictability; personal and social legitimacy; and meaning, hope, and significance; its citizens need to look to those community memberships and individual actions in those communities that can fulfill those needs. One obvious broad-scope attempt at a solution is to join a religion. Let's look in more detail at the role of religion in meeting the basic human needs of individuals.

Shideler (1992) has approached spirituality from the point of view of DP, and has given it a particularly broad characterization as that domain within the lives of persons that has to do with totality (e.g. of one's world), ultimacy (especially ultimate significance), and boundary conditions (i.e. how one deals with the logically possible infinite regresses, such as those of causation or significance). This domain, then, includes questions like: "Why am I here?", "Where did I come from?", "What matters in life?", "What are the foundations of morality", as well as questions about the legitimacy of those very questions. Everyone has the possibility of questions and issues in this domain, and everyone gets to make at least some of their own choices about them, if only to ignore them.

It is possible in principle to make all of one's own choices about spirituality without any help or agreement from the outside. It is also astronomically difficult to do so, and the effort is fraught with pitfalls. The main obstacle is that any intentional action takes place within the context of some community. (Again we look back to Maxim E1: "A person requires a community in order for it to be possible for him to engage in human behavior at all" [Ossorio, 1982/1998, p75]. Consequently, the person with an inclination toward certain choices in the spiritual domain will need at least a friend or two with similar inclinations with whom to act on his spiritual choices.

Shideler defines a *religion* as a community all of whose members and practices are, in the paradigm case, infused with spirituality (Shideler, 1992). Therefore the mission of such a community typically includes:

- Supporting the spiritual domain in the lives of its members,

- making community membership available to those currently outside the community seeking such support,
- preserving the organization in order to similarly support members in the future, and
- promoting general harmony in the world at large (so that the first three are not disrupted).

These, then, are the supports one can reasonably expect from his religion.

Another possibility, contrasting with that of depending on one's community for the bulk of one's basic needs, is to piece together a life out of membership in a variety of communities, each of which provides for fulfillment of a relatively small number of needs; hobbies and membership in clubs or volunteer organizations are of this sort. This approach features a major risk that something important will be left out; it is significant that the construction of the major cultures and religions took a long time and a lot of trial and error. Moreover, trying the cafeteria approach—selecting your favorite pieces of the real worlds of several communities—is likely to leave you with a real world full of holes and logical inconsistencies. Nevertheless as the world grows smaller many of us find ourselves in the presence of multiple cultures, with opportunities for taking the best of many worlds, and the challenges of dealing with persons of a different culture than the one in which we grew up.

Perspectives explored earlier in this article reveal why communication across cultures is difficult: different cultures have different worlds. Those different worlds can have different concepts, languages, principles, ethics, esthetics, and practices. Yet cooperation across cultures often goes well enough, especially in the context of business deals. Why does it so often go badly? Well, the small success, say, of closing an initial business deal may blind one to the depths of one's ignorance of the other and his culture. Another, more general, explanation is that it is so easy to forget you are operating across a cultural boundary that you neglect the skills for doing so successfully. And if you neglect those skills, a vicious cycle of

mutual misunderstanding and mutual devaluation can easily result. Here is a sampling of those skills derived, in part, from the differences listed above:

- Meeting the other person half way, e.g. by learning some of her language
- Expressing things in the other person's language
- Appealing to the other's principles
- Seeing another's perspectives and behavior as a successful adaptation to an environmental niche, rather than as a pathology.
- Bearing important cultural differences in mind *all the time*
- Giving the benefit of the doubt
- Keeping in mind what you are trying to do together, and avoiding trying to convert anyone on questions that are not relevant to the task at hand
- And perhaps most important: treating another as a *member in good standing of a different community*, rather than as a *defective member of your own community*

And finally, a principle that perhaps should go hand in hand with treating the other person as a member in good standing of a different community*: Treat mutual cross-community insults as symptoms of a social disease, the disease of absolutism, that error of confusing our way of life with the way of life. And then set about finding out how the life in the community "those people" are members of makes sense: their practices, their values, and their world* (Zeiger and Jeffrey, 2000). In the words of noted biologist Ursula Goodenough:

"Thus there is no such thing as the 'fittest' kind of organism. We can only talk about how an organism propagates in a given niche, how its life strategies have become adapted to that niche. It is no more or less fit than another kind of organism that has adapted to some other niche" (Good-

enough, 1998, p78). Communities are like that too.

4. Conclusion

Thus, each of us in today's world gets to exercise Ortega y Gassett's compulsory freedom in (at least):

- Creating our actions at all levels of significance, and at all scopes, from minute-by-minute to lifelong
- Choosing which physical and social constraints to push back against
- Casting of friends and acquaintances in roles in our world
- Choosing communities in which to participate
- Choosing roles in each community

That is a lot of freedom!

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