FREEDOM AND TRUTH: A CONSTANT CHALLENGE OF LIVING IN SOCIETY

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Freedom and truth are topics that have engaged the attention of many throughout history. In different contexts, they continue to be the subject of much debate in society. Given the variety of interests and, at times, questionable references, there is a need to probe much more closely into what is involved in citing these two ideas. This article discusses the underpinnings of the notions of freedom and truth and provides relevant considerations of fundamental issues in the hope of throwing some light on their usage in discussions. It then offers suggestions on how some guiding principles may help resolve specific situations.

Keywords: Accountability, Freedom, Rights, Society, Truth

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of freedom and truth have been of particular interest to many, not least to philosophers. Given that these are closely associated with the search for and the acquisition of wisdom, to which philosophical thinking is devoted, this is hardly surprising. In fact, philosophers like Aristotle have argued that these two are what distinguish human beings from every other creature; and the more we rely on them, the more characteristically human our actions are. It is not, of course, only this group or this activity that has been concerned with probing into these notions or making specific references to them in various contexts. Somehow they have even become part and parcel of our interactions with one another in varied guises and contexts. They are certain topics that feature in discussions throughout history and today.

There is, however, a particular use of, or a reference to, these two notions in contemporary society that, to an extent, needs further investigation. One hears it in debates or even in ordinary conversations. Somehow, it grabs one's attention—one suspects that that is, in fact, the intention of those who refer to them—and whatever claim is made is meant to be simply regarded as acceptable or even conclusive once there is an association established with freedom or truth.

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The reference to freedom, for instance, is loudly voiced in protests, that is to say, when an issue, a law, or a certain practice—already in force or being deliberated—is at the center of attention. Because human freedom is so much associated with one's development as a truly human being, any attempt to curtail or even restrict it by anyone else is regarded as a violation of what is at the core of one's humanity. One hears, therefore, of fighting against those who limit or eradicate the possibility of exercising one's freedom. Another issue that one comes across generally or frequently hears voiced in debates, even to the extent of claiming that this is where the truth lies, is the so-called evidence-based argumentation. It is meant to convince everyone that anything asserted, so long as it is backed by tangible or visible evidence, is, in fact, the truth. Anything else is dismissed as simply a concoction or distortion of the facts. The assertion is supposed to clinch any argumentation. Still, another one is the ready association of one's acts with a manifestation of the freedom of speech: given the rapid development in information and digital technology and the proliferation of social media, there seems to be a felt need to upload images and data, irrespective of any consequences. Social media, rightly or wrongly, have been accused of being quick to capitalize on this—for good or bad

In this paper, I intend to examine these two notions of freedom and truth in the context of some references made to them, especially in our times. The hope is that a more philosophically-nuanced understanding, rather than simply an assertion, will not only help clarify certain points about these two notions but also advance our understanding of these and related issues as we live our lives in society.

THE EXERCISE OF HUMAN FREEDOM

Interacting with one another in the society in which we live inevitably leads to certain complex situations—for example, the debate regarding human rights, the conflict in law between individual interests and the common good, the tension between privacy and transparency, and many such complications—that are underpinned by the reality or only apparent existence of human freedom. Accordingly, it would certainly be worthwhile to examine the notion of freedom itself. For this reason, such a fundamental notion has been the subject of much attention. However, since my focus here is on certain references to freedom in contemporary society, I will pass over the philosophical debate between determinists and indeterminists, important as this may be in itself. The reference to freedom, as found in many a protest or claim, takes for granted its reality. It should also be stressed here that being endowed with the gift of freedom, humans have the inborn right to exercise it. That is not being disputed, either. In other words, what I wish instead to examine more closely here is what is involved in the exercise of human freedom since, in the present context, that is what seems to require more urgent reflection on our part.

Firstly, it is important to note that the exercise of human freedom is an instance of *causality* rather than simply a manifestation of one's wishes or a matter of choice on one's part, as is sometimes interpreted by those who want to defend their actions.

It means that it is not merely an activation of what one is but is instead an act that always has an effect. Furthermore, this kind of causality does not always result in the same kind of effect, and for that reason, we need to be cautious. It is not completely predictable or determined. While there is an element about it that can be foreseen, there is also a part that remains outside of one's control or knowledge. In other words, there is some truth in both indeterminism and determinism when these defend their respective stance regarding human action.

It should be noted furthermore that freedom actually implies a certain amount of autonomy, rather than a totality. That is to say, human freedom itself is not absolute, even if it is, to an extent, unique. This is because there is truly a plurality of freedoms since every human being is endowed with some freedom. Therefore, the actuality of freedom also signifies necessarily a partial determination by others, a fact overlooked at times by those who strongly object to any limitations to their own exercise. In being determined this way, any free act is, at the same time, though not in the same respect, an effect after all. The exercise of freedom is thus acting upon other genuine freedoms. It may be setting limits to the freedom of others, but it is not the same as destroying it.

In recognizing the genuineness of the freedom of others, one is not taking away or preventing their freedom, but rather is fostering and inspiring that freedom. This is not, of course, always the case, nor is it seen to be the situation. However, the truly powerful—in this way of thinking—is more like the creative orator, thinker, and artist who inspires creative responses in others. They truly exercise their freedom by encouraging appropriate originality in others, rather than dictating specific actions. The powerful ruler is one who places others in a position to make fruitful decisions of their own. He or she awakens creativity in others, inspires them by providing them with opportunities, and by fostering creativity in them. The powerful can impose limits on disagreements, conflicts, and confusions, but she or he cannot simply eliminate these confusions. The ideal form of power thereby inspires freedom in others enabling them to act freely and yet in such a way that a coherent and in general harmonious world comes about. There really is nothing ideal about possessing total control and reducing others to powerlessness. The concentration of decision-making in the one being is, in principle, undesirable because the values of life are essentially social, involving the interactions of more or less free individuals.

Given such an interpretation of the exercise of freedom, what are the implications for our understanding of its various forms of limitation? One important consideration is that such a description of human actions means that the relationship of one cause to another does not result in the loss of freedom of the other despite any attempt to do so. In other words, there is no absolutizing of the control that one exercises over the other, even if the control is so great that one is left tremendously restricted. Ultimately, there is no robbing of anyone's autonomy. The other always remains an entity in its own right; and there is no complete loss of the other's own power, so to speak. Unconvincing as it may seem at times, given certain cases or situations, this is what being free, in essence, means ultimately. This can even be of some consolation, as has been illustrated in countless examples. This is what makes each of us distinctive and is the basis of our uniqueness.

Another consideration to be made in this context is that the attempt to exercise unilateral control, robbing others of their freedom—and it is merely an attempt, according to this way of thinking—actually has an effect on that party as well. It becomes an integral part of its actuality and therefore has a real consequence to it. In other words, one becomes a different reality because of what one does or tries to do. The restrictions that we impose on others have an impact on our very own reality. Dictators, tyrants, and despots—and we have them not just in history but even today—appear to be ignorant of how their controlling actions do not deprive their subjects of the opportunity to exercise their freedom but are actually short-changing themselves. There is some truth to the observation, paradoxical as it may seem, that total control by them actually restrains their own ability to be true human beings.²

In such a philosophy of human freedom, one can also see in discussions of rights, e.g., freedom of speech, as a way of contextualizing what has just been asserted that one can indeed uphold the existence of such an abstract right but the concrete exercise of such a right may have to be more circumspect. That is to say, the claim of freedom as being integral to our humanity is abstract, while the exercise of that same freedom is concrete. This point is at times overlooked in the debates regarding the alleged freedom of speech illustrated in many contemporary contexts. It should be remembered that the exercise of any right does not occur in a vacuum.³ The identification of the abstract, i.e., the existence of freedom, with the concrete, i.e., the exercise of freedom, can lead not just to conceptual confusion but also to unfortunate tangible consequences. Moving from the abstract notion to the concrete and sometimes specific situations requires knowledge of details, including how such a move impacts on others. Insistence on one's freedom does not justify trampling on the rights of others.

Moreover, it should be borne in mind that human rights, often quoted by those championing freedom of speech, are based on *our nature* and not simply on the existence of freedom itself. Our freedom as human beings enables us to exercise those rights, but it is not their basis but rather our human nature. It also means that any exercise of freedom, by ourselves or by others, which devalues our human nature is at best suspect and at worst unjustifiable. Similarly, curtailing human freedom by imposing limitations can only be justified—and this point needs stressing—if these enhance the humanity of all those involved. At the same time, however, we need to be reminded once more that restricting human freedom is not in itself a downgrading or violation of human rights.⁴

Developments in contemporary society certainly show the need for a further investigation of the issue of human freedom and its exercise. Human freedom and its various expressions feature in debates regarding the legislation on abortion in the USA, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Britain and France, the unrestricted use of Facebook(Meta) and Twitter, the proliferation of cyber-bullying, the protection of whistle-blowers and the wearing of particular garbs at work or in society at large—to mention just a few examples.⁵ There have been constant references to freedom of choice, respect for individual rights, and transparency in public affairs. There have also been recent cases involving the media when the right to information, as well as freedom of speech, have been cited to justify certain activities. We will recall that it has been asserted here that while freedom itself is

basic to our humanity, i.e., fundamental to our development and therefore unrestricted its exercise is not without limitations.

However, should we be bothered with these issues and questions, particularly since there seem to be no straightforward answers? Unfortunately, unless we take a harder look at them, we could be misled. What is taken for granted and what has always been held may have a useful purpose for ordinary contexts, but these can also be unhelpful or even wrong when investigated further. It is essential, therefore, that we do reflect on such questions more thoroughly, even if no ready and neat answers are immediately forthcoming. Warped thinking can cloud the fundamental issues. And the danger is that it could lead to questionable decisions and actions.

On the issue of freedom, while we may realize that we are free insofar as we are decision-makers—a point made at the start—we need to be even more aware that the human form of freedom is a privilege for which we humans should be grateful. It gives us a certain status and dignity—not merely value. Thus, it deserves our utmost respect. Because it is so fundamental to our make-up as human beings, we can definitely justify claims to having rights at different levels. Furthermore, removing our freedom or restricting it can and does destroy our very essence; therefore, defending it and our rights is necessary if we are to live genuinely human lives in human society.⁶

At the same time, however, it needs to be stressed and seriously considered—which regrettably does not always happen—that being free is a fundamental responsibility. The rights we possess due to our freedom also provide us with duties to others. Therefore, we need to be conscious of the rights of others as we interact with them. Human beings are not isolated individuals, and our existence is always a co-existence, not just with other human beings but also with the whole of creation. Human freedom is not just about exercising it but, even more importantly, respecting it and accepting certain limitations. With it comes a certain amount of accountability.

Since human rationality entails the use of the intellect, it means that the exercise of freedom must also be in line with such use. Accordingly, human freedom is the rational exercise of our humanity. However, it is not simply a matter of exercising it because one possesses the ability to do so. As was mentioned earlier, it is most unfortunate when a resort is made to the various forms of freedom, such as the freedom of speech, without the accompanying rational reflection on one's activity or intended action. Aristotle, Aquinas, and many others have rightly emphasized that free will is one important feature of rationality, but the other one is the intellect. These are meant to be used concurrently by human beings for an act to be truly ethical and, therefore, justified and justifiable.

Understandably, the existence of human freedom and its various forms may lead to a conflict—and we are experiencing it in various contexts—that needs to be addressed and hopefully resolved. This is why there is a tension, for instance, between individual and public interests. Additionally, certain laws in society have to be introduced not just to limit certain actions but also to protect the innocent. But it is precisely because we are free that we should be in a position to resolve these matters. Reconciling conflicts, easing tensions, and balancing opposing claims are possible only because we have been endowed with freedom.⁸ Were we completely

determined, many of these conflicts and tensions would, of course, not arise in the first place, but neither could we improve any situation either. Our choices and decisions may, at times, have unacceptable and even disastrous consequences, but it is also within our abilities to seek out remedies and solutions. And surprisingly, the more we deal with those conflicts and tensions conscientiously and the more we respect the freedom of others, the more we develop our own respective freedoms. Not only will we deepen our appreciation of being free, we will also grasp the true meaning of human freedom. In short, human freedom, which dignifies our status, can be the source of conflict and the resource for a solution.

Finally, can humans have too much freedom? Can having so much choice actually be healthy for our development as human beings? Is to be free the same as to live, rather than merely survive, as humans? Given that some people crave for it, fight for it and even die for it, is it not rather absurd even to consider this question?¹⁰ Nonetheless, it would be instructive to note that freedom also shows that the absence of any restriction actually results in chaos, surprising as this may seem.¹¹ If there is no causality at all, we would have a chaotic situation. If we all exercised our freedom fully, we would have a hopelessly unsurvivable society. Paradoxically, parameters, limits, and restrictions—and these can be in different forms—can actually enhance our freedom insofar as they enable us to exercise it differently. 12 They can even motivate us to make the right choices. Ethical behavior is a particularly apposite example. Here once again, we do need to be guided by our human intellect. Rational thinking can and does provide certain justified reasons for curtailing freedom. But it is also rational thinking that can challenge us to seek out alternatives, map out another route, and opt for the better choice. In this respect, truth plays an important role. So let us now turn our attention to this notion.

TRUTH AS A CONSIDERATION

Like freedom and its exercise, the issue of truth has always been of concern to philosophers. In fact, it is intimately associated with the quest for wisdom. However, it is also a fundamental consideration for living in society. Although in ordinary life or in our varied professions, we do not always focus on it, the issue of truth at all times underpins what we do and how we act. Let us give it our attention now.

But what is truth? How do we know that we are in possession of truth? How can we educate ourselves so that we are led by truth rather than by mere appearances or speculation? These are age-old questions that nevertheless continue to challenge life in society to this day. A working definition of truth is that it corresponds with the facts or with reality. As with the earlier discussion centered on the exercise of freedom, the focus here, however, is not so much providing a definition of truth itself but the way we communicate what is regarded as true. A popular way of expressing the latter is when one claims that one is "telling it as it is" without any embellishment, any value judgment, or any commentary on the part of the speaker. The claim is that one is being "objective" and is thereby truthful.

There is a presumption, however, in this common view, and it needs to be challenged just as total subjectivism or pure relativism ought to be critically assessed also. It has to be pointed out, first of all, that imparting truth or truths is not like simply delivering goods. There is always a certain amount of subjectivity precisely because one cannot completely exclude a contribution, conscious or unconscious, from the speaker. As has been succinctly noted, *Quidquid recipitur recipitur ad modum recipientis*. In the same way that any form of communication is received in accordance with the nature of the recipient so any communication from the communicator is always tainted with the background, concerns, and perspective of the communicator. We transmit and incorporate our respective subjectivity when we report what we have learned, heard, or seen. Contrary to conventional belief, the facts do not speak for themselves. For instance, that point is often overlooked when one claims an "evidence-based" reason or judgment. All that one can really and legitimately claim is that one makes an effort to be as objective as possible. Truth, therefore, in the human sphere, is hardly "telling it as it is."¹³

So, to what extent can one have or communicate the truth? Can one be objective at all? Are relativism and subjectivism right, after all? Using again the working definition that truth is correspondence with reality, ¹⁴ one can make a crucial distinction between absolute truth and relative truth. In other words, truth ultimately is about reality itself (absolute truth) rather than experienced or thought reality (relative truth). Since our contact with reality is always in accordance with our nature as knowers, ¹⁵ there is always an element of subjectivity, whether we accept it or not. Charles Hartshorne, a contemporary American philosopher, reminds us that our knowledge of the absolute is not absolute. That is to say, assuming that there are absolute truths, our grasp of these same absolute truths is always relative.

This philosophical consideration of truth does need to be pursued further; however, in the context of the right to know, a claim often heard in our times. As human beings, we develop ourselves the more we have access to the truth. But the proliferation of sources of information, the ever-increasing possibilities of retrieving that information, and the speed of divulging that information worldwide have created a new situation that threatens one's life in society today. Added to this problem is the difficulty, and even impossibility, of removing false information that remains available to all and endangers one's reputation and life. 16 Cyberbullying has ruined many lives, particularly the vulnerable. It is not surprising, therefore, that many today have serious reservations about, and even reject outright, such sources of information as the Internet, e-mail, Twitter, Facebook (Meta), and others. The abuses, at times, can be so overwhelming to the extent that they indicate a worrying trend in certain quarters of society. That worry extends to the retrieval of highly confidential matters that could endanger lives. Yet those who do engage in what has become known as "hacktivism" justify their action by defending the right to know and freedom of speech and accusing those who have the information of covering up. 17 Clearly, there are critical issues regarding the dissemination of information that deserve serious consideration.

Those who insist on everyone's right to know, which underpins the sharing of information, are correct to point out that this is indeed a human right and not just a legal right. ¹⁸ In that sense, it is really more fundamental and pervasive than any recognition of it by society. In fact, because it is a human right, one can rightfully challenge a society that limits it or, worse, thwarts it. Political systems have suffered

their downfall at times because they have blocked the communication of information which their citizens have claimed a right to be given. There have been numerous protests and rallies denouncing such political regimes. Many have suffered or even sacrificed their lives to protect this right.¹⁹

This human right to know is rooted in human nature itself. As Thomas Aquinas pointed out in his discussion of the natural law, which he regards as the basis for ethics, the awareness that human nature is directed towards an ultimate goal of fulfilling itself—individually and collectively—cannot be accomplished if it is not provided with the opportunity to develop itself.²⁰ Since human nature is rational and since a necessary means to its flourishing as rational is knowledge, one can truly and justifiably assert the right to know. That right to know extends to getting information that will contribute towards the development of one's rationality.²¹

While the human right to know is indeed part and parcel of our human nature, it does not, however, extend to getting every kind of information or even every truth. This consideration is often ignored to the detriment of everyone. The right to know is a basic right. It is also a universal right. But it should not be confused with an imagined or claimed entitlement to a particular piece of information or even a specific truth. It does not cover retrieving every single datum or ferreting out details from every source. While the right to know is an individual right, which is meant that every human being possesses it, it does not confer a right to solicit information from lawfully protected sources. Nor does it necessarily override the legitimate need to shield the information from those seeking it. This is because the right to know is exercised in an important context, namely, one's involvement with others and with society at large. This right, while fundamental, does not take away one's duty to acknowledge and respect the rights of other individuals and of society itself. Therefore, the human right to know should not be regarded as a blanket assertion, which, unfortunately, is sometimes the case in certain situations or with certain individuals or groups. It is not the same as the mere desire to satisfy one's curiosity much as that is appealing to many of us.

Connected with the right to know is the issue of freedom of speech. Again, the basis for asserting freedom of speech is our human nature. Not only are human beings endowed with an intellect, but they are also gifted with free will, as discussed earlier. Unlike non-humans, human beings can choose freely. They can exercise their ability, when faced with various options, to opt for one rather than another. This gift and ability, inherent in what makes one human, includes being able to speak or communicate freely, unhindered by any exterior cause or factor. Anyone who tries to curtail, restrict or deny that right is violating a fundamental human right. A government that does not honor this right is rightly criticized or denounced. It also provides a basis for legitimate protest and opposition.

At the same time, however, it must be borne in mind that the right to speech is not and cannot be regarded as absolute inasmuch as it is a right that impacts on others. To claim freedom of speech because one simply wants to exercise it is being irresponsible. For speech to be effective, it has to be heard. Unlike talking to oneself privately, the exercise of the freedom of speech connotes that there is a hearer or receiver—and that other party will be affected. This is why freedom of speech is really a "relational" right, i.e., it connects, so to speak, and is not just exercised.

Many supporters of this right seem to forget this basic point. Accordingly, one must—in the very exercise of the freedom to speech—be aware of and respect the other party or parties.

This brings us to the equally fundamental right to privacy, another right so often asserted not just in the context of a tension with the right to know or the freedom of speech but also in various situations when someone else interferes with or intrudes into one's "space"—physical, intellectual, emotional and so on.²² At times, this right is associated with one's strong wishes to "be left alone" by or "to create a distance" from others.²³ The right to privacy extends to groups or societies and is seen as crucial in their development, and any interference by outsiders is considered to be an unwelcome encroachment. This is particularly true in the case of the protection of sensitive material.²⁴

So, to what extent is it, firstly, a truly fundamental right? Again, its basis is our make-up as human beings. There is something in each of us that is unique to us. For this reason, every individual has rightly been called "a world unto itself." That irreplaceable status is never duplicated and is the basis of self-esteem. Since it is coming from oneself rather than endowed on one, 25 it cannot be taken away, overridden, or violated without defacing one's very humanity. Given the nature of this basis, the right to privacy is indeed fundamental. It thereby imposes an equally fundamental obligation on everyone else to acknowledge and respect it. 26 Thus, prying information from any of us or exposing one to public scrutiny to the extent that it degrades us, i.e., robs us of our very humanity, is justifiably challenged or even stopped. In the case of a group's or a society's comparable right to privacy, not only is it also based on the nature of the individuals comprising the grouping, but it could also be its very survival—or at least its well-being—that is a stake. In varying degrees, a threat to it could be a threat to its very existence, and it is understandable as well as justifiable that the group or society as a whole would seek to protect it.

A related consideration here is the issue of confidentiality. Confidentiality is an acknowledgment of the right to privacy inasmuch as when one confides in or entrusts information to another, it is with the expectation that no one else is a party to the information. It remains private. One could even go further and claim that a breach of confidentiality is tantamount to trampling on the confident's right to privacy.

At the same time, however, there can be a tension since one cannot hide behind the curtain of confidentiality or the right to privacy if by upholding it and because one is protecting it, other rights are ignored and even endangered. Thus, such situations lead to questions such as: To what extent should one's right to privacy be respected? If someone entrusts information on the basis of strict confidentiality and particularly does so only on that basis, are there circumstances that can override the promise to maintain confidentiality? Is confidentiality such that it must be maintained even if the consequences are grave?²⁷

It is obvious, from what has been stated here, that the right to privacy and the related right to confidentiality would come into conflict—as has earlier been pointed out—with the right to know and the freedom of speech, both of which have already been shown to be fundamental. Accordingly, certain guidelines or laws need to be drawn up and have been drawn up. This is because the right to privacy is situational; that is to say, it is asserted because one is in society. If one were to be in complete

isolation—which is not possible realistically—then there would be no need even to be aware of it. There would be no one to interfere with it. However, because we live in the immediate surroundings of others—and affect one another—then it is inevitable that, while fundamental, it is not a right that trumps the right of others to secure information about one or relevant others or to impose on one an obligation to be more open about oneself or one's actions. In other words, the right to privacy is not a complete withdrawal from the social aspect of one's humanity. It is certainly not an alibi to ignore one's obligations to others and to their safety and welfare.

APPROPRIATENESS, ACCEPTABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY AS GUIDELINES

It will be obvious from this discussion of the right to know, freedom of speech, and privacy that living in society creates—as is to be expected—a rather complex situation. Previously, we had examined the ramifications of the nature and the exercise of freedom. How do these rights feature in named circumstances? What happens when there is a tension or even a conflict between these rights? How does one reconcile these? Who has the authority to address and redress the conflict? Let us take a closer look at these issues now in the context of what has been asserted here regarding truth and freedom.

But first, a word of caution. The difficulty with these questions—and for anyone attempting possible answers—is that they are dependent on the specificity of each case.²⁸ It would be unhelpful and, in fact, foolhardy to attempt answers that could be regarded as generally applicable. Equally, it would be unwelcome and even preposterous to state that there can be no answers because each situation is so unique. Somehow and in some way, answers must be provided if one is to continue living in society and to meet its challenges. That is a task for us, individually and collectively.

In this context, I should like to suggest for further consideration the following: First, that the criterion of *appropriateness* can be of help with our thinking in the present scenario; that is to say, whatever is appropriate in a given instance would be the determining factor. That may sound suspiciously subjective to many. Hence, we do need to examine both the criterion and its usage more closely as certain connotations, as is the case with every word, are associated with it. Let me explain further.

Appropriateness, as used here, does not mean that what one regards as appropriate is completely subjective, i.e., totally dependent on the speaker or agent. Neither is it totally tied to the particular situation. It is not entirely limited to a specific time either. As was set out previously, our considerations of these issues should indeed take into account circumstances and subjective features, but we have likewise noted the need for an objective basis for one's answers. The claim here is that the criterion of appropriateness, contrary to the other connotations, fulfills this need. This is because one's judgment of what is appropriate in a given circumstance should be shaped by one's knowledge of both the concrete and abstract dimensions of the situation. It shows sensitivity regarding the content, activity, or decision. It is alert to the suitability of both the material and its method of implementation. It is a

Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy Vol. 24, Number 2, June 2023 realization that the agent, the recipient, and the communication itself are all involved or to be considered in what one deems appropriate. In short, appropriateness means that, ultimately, it is a *considered* judgment that one has to make in the face of the specificity of the situation against the background of certain fundamental factors. It is not a mere opinion, view, or choice.

This means that a considerable amount of responsibility rests on whoever, be it an individual or a group, judges that it would be appropriate to communicate or display images, exercise the right to know, claim freedom of speech, breach confidentiality, or withdraw information.²⁹ Since a judgment, and not just an expression of opinion, is called for, it must be well-informed and substantiated. What are at stake, after all, are fundamental rights that all parties possess and which must be respected. These are not mere slogans that are mouthed or issued—which can, at times, be the case in demonstrations or protest marches. Judging a course of action or activity to be appropriate, in keeping with our rational human nature, demands consideration of several relevant factors, including the well-being of all and not just the interests of one side.

The inevitable subjective feature of this criterion, which has been acknowledged, simply means that one has to take measures to ensure that one's judgment is not completely one-sided. The criterion of appropriateness actually makes it open too to others to question whether what one individual or a group has judged to be appropriate is right. Because the display of images or communication of information affects the recipient, because the claim to freedom of speech can run counter to another's right to privacy, because breaking confidentiality can jeopardize security and trust, because one's insistence to exercise one's freedom can violate the freedom of others, it is not enough for someone or some group to simply claim that, as far as one is concerned, the activity or course of action is appropriate.³⁰

This observation brings us to a second guiding principle being proposed here: *acceptability*. Admittedly, its introduction here risks suspicion, too, since, after all, what is acceptable even for the majority is not necessarily what is right. Acceptability as a criterion is too close to convention, a standard rightly criticized by Plato. He pointed out that many of the practices during his time may have been acceptable to society, but he questioned whether they were just. Moreover, what is acceptable may be suitable to certain parties and yet may in itself be unfair or even harmful. It may even be a violation of certain rights.

Nonetheless, the criterion of acceptability provides an important consideration in ascertaining the merits of one's judgment of appropriateness; namely, it makes one ask whether the activity or course of action is truly acceptable to those who will be affected by it.³¹ Asking that question provides some kind of corrective to the judgment of appropriateness insofar as it enables one to be more objective.³² Taking into account the criterion of acceptability amounts to considering the susceptibility and even vulnerability of the recipient of one's communication, activity, or decision. Thus, it does not just mean asking whether it would be acceptable to oneself if one were the recipient, as those others who will be affected may not be in the same frame of mind or state of receptivity. Moreover, acceptability as a criterion also applies to the content, i.e., the image or the information. One must also scrutinize it as to

whether it will be truly acceptable to or positively received by the specific recipient or recipients.³³

This consideration leads us to the third criterion that is being suggested here: *accountability*. We have been discussing various rights and have noted that the basis of such rights is our nature as human beings. While the existence of any right gives the possessor a claim, however, it also imposes a corresponding duty. The exercise of the right entails that one must do so in a responsible way—as befits a rational human being. Therefore, one must be accountable in one's pursuit of the truth or information or in one's exercise of freedom. Accountability also entails that one acknowledges not just the existence of others but also, and more significantly, their dignity. It means that they, too, have rights that must be honored in one's exercise of one's own rights. It is regrettable that many seem to ignore or simply violate that fundamental datum. It is, therefore, essential that the criterion of accountability features in any discussion—or exercise—of the fundamental rights which we have been discussing.

It will be noted—and possibly criticized—that these three criteria revolve too much on the agent and impose a burden on his/her judgment. This is correct, but it should be stressed that, after all, exercising one's freedom and seeking the truth in the many ways discussed here are the *acts* of the agent; and for that reason, the focus should be on the agent's judgment. These three criteria proposed here are meant to be guidelines that hopefully can facilitate us as agents to have both an appreciative as well as a critical look at the issues. The earlier analysis of these shows the complexity of the situation. Moreover, entrenched views, which at times clog the way we conduct our lives in society, have a way of getting us bogged down—thus misleading us all. They are not without damaging consequences.

Ultimately, however, much depends on the moral sensitivity of individuals, a point well-argued by Buber and Mencius. This is why education, and not just schooling, is so crucial to our development as individual agents and as members of society. The guidelines proposed here are not intended either to replace concrete measures such as laws or policies. Given the frailties of human nature and the lessons of history, society would also benefit from having the external support provided by laws and policies.³⁴ It is important, nonetheless, to take up the challenge of scrutinizing prevalent views or popular slogans as a fundamental step in taking up the challenge of living alongside one another.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Alfred North Whitehead, a 20th-century British mathematician, scientist, and philosopher, compared speculative thinking (his term for metaphysics) to the flight of an airplane: it starts on the ground and rises to the rarefied atmosphere but lands back on the ground. He stressed that such thinking—despite its perceived abstractness—should likewise show that it can throw some light on rather obscure ideas and recover their relevance to daily life.

This paper discussed how freedom and truth, two seemingly abstract notions which have been the subject of much philosophical thinking throughout the ages, do have some concrete and practical importance to our lives in society and in our

interaction with one another, especially these days with increased technological advances, shifting values and the spread of disinformation. Accordingly, it is crucial that we examine them rather than simply refer to them as we interact with one another.³⁵ Socrates, Confucius, and many others have led the way, and we would do well to follow in their footsteps.

NOTES

- 1. Admittedly, not everyone who resorts to this phrase claims complete objectivity.
- 2. As we have witnessed in a number of cases, it is doubtful whether tyrants and dictators in the past as well as today, would be convinced by this comment, but this does not make it any less true.
- 3. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some of those opposed to the general vaccination program of their governments were known to assert their so-called freedom of choice. It was pointed out to them that their action impacted on the health and welfare of all and even endangered lives, including their own.
- 4. This point becomes particularly relevant in discussions that have an ethical significance involving the deprivation of freedom, such as imprisonment or protests over the violation of fundamental rights. It is also a relevant consideration in cases that involve the overriding of one's freedom, as in court decisions to give food or blood to those who refuse it despite the danger of death. Contemporary developments, e.g., the pandemic, have likewise brought this issue to the fore because of the restrictions imposed on the movements of citizens.
- 5. A recent development has been the protests in sporting events, with players and fans publicly showing solidarity with those fighting against prejudice in different forms, e.g., at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar as well as in other countries.
- 6. This situation is borne out by the continuing fight for freedom throughout the world on an individual as well as societal level. History shows how it has cost countless lives and ruined so many societies. Human freedom is rightly described as priceless.
- 7. One of the most controversial cases highlighting this point has been the alleged freedom to determine the ending of one's life under specific difficult situations.
- 8. This was illustriously exemplified in the life and work of Nelson Mandela, who insisted that freedom is not about losing chains but, more importantly, about being able to help others. After his release from prison, he devoted his time to working for the elimination of apartheid in South Africa and mediating conflicts throughout the world. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work.
- 9. Advertising by a number of businesses capitalizes on the attraction of "freedom," such as the so-called freedom that comes with the use of their credit cards, the purchase of a new car, or being transformed into a more attractive individual!
- 10. With teenagers in general, growing up is many times equated with "being free," i.e., being able to do whatever one wishes. On a more serious note, one can

sympathize with those who have been denied any freedom at all. From another rather ironic angle, there are those who have risked imprisonment or torture for the sake of their freedom.

- 11. Given the tremendous developments in digital technology, there is much talk about digital rights, a topic that considers a number of issues dealing with freedom as well as restrictions.
- 12. It has seemed to me to be true that at times when certain doors in life have closed on us, other doors open as a result. They lead us to a different route which may not have been planned.
- 13. Even the so-called telling of facts as facts involves a selection and judgment on the part of the speaker. For example, the citing of a date as March 17, 1970, already indicates that one has chosen to refer to it using the Arabic/Christian preference for listing dates rather than another system and preferring the English system of putting the day before the month. This is why there is much truth in the claim that whatever is said is not just informing us but also revealing something about the speaker. The same can be said about "evidence-based" presentations.
- 14. The "correspondence criterion" of truth can be complemented by the "coherence criterion" in this perspective inasmuch as it pays particular attention to the content of knowledge and the role of the knower.
- 15. This point is reminiscent of, but not equivalent to, Kant's distinction between reality itself vs. reality as it appears to us.
- 16. Those who print or communicate false or misleading information seem to ignore the fact that despite an apology or correction in a later edition or broadcast, one cannot really retrieve the previous information and retract any damage done since the readers and the audience do not always remain the same. Thus, vigilance and sensitivity are paramount from the very start.
- 17. Cf. "How Hackers Changed the World," written and directed by Brian Knappenbergen and aired on BBC Four on February 20, 2013.
- 18. A related phrase that is in currency these days is "transparency" in all one's dealings. More recently, there has been talk of the legal duty of candor, particularly in the medical profession.
- 19. Among these has been the plight of certain groups in various countries who have been fighting for free speech and the right to information—which regrettably seem to be understood differently by those in power in that country.
- 20. For Aquinas, the ultimate end of human beings is *communio*, participation in the very nature of the Creator.
- 21. It is for this reason that one can rightfully assert everyone's right to education. It excludes being unduly exposed to propaganda or spin, so common in communications by those who wish to throw a veil over the truth.
- 22. A recent controversy in this regard is a piece of Facebook's facial-recognition technology, the so-called "tag suggest" feature, in Europe. Opposed due to privacy laws, Facebook has had to switch it off in the meantime. Previously, there had been unease over the technology developed by Google Earth for the mapping of streets, which led to their blurring of recognizable details, such as car registration information.

- 23. A number of political heads have resorted to this right claiming that their private life should be respected. Commentators have pointed out, however, that it has political and social implications because of the position they hold.
- 24. Debates about, and tensions over, this particular issue has been heightened and broadened because of developments in related areas, such as military affairs.
- 25. This claim can still be asserted even if one takes the religious view that it is a gift from the Creator.
- 26. The trend of selling or circulating personal data that one has entered into the websites of companies when doing business with them and photos on social networking sites is worrying. Fortunately, there are moves to update the data protection laws in Europe (drawn up prior to the Internet) to eliminate some of the abuses.
- 27. These questions have certainly come to the fore recently because of abuses in various areas and spheres which have been covered up by those in authority resorting to the alleged need for confidentiality. Also, reference to "commercial sensitivity" is used to avoid divulging information on certain business transactions.
- 28. It is important to gather as many relevant facts as possible and to increase one's knowledge of these prior to making a judgment.
- 29. These issues have been stirred up with some controversies among individuals but have extended to governments and countries.
- 30. One wonders how those who distribute or upload pornography—especially when children are both the subject and possible recipients—can consider their actions as appropriate. The same can be said about those who incite violence, upload graphic footage of violent incidents, or resort to sex texting through these channels of communication. The move by Google and Microsoft to introduce safeguards is to be welcomed. Recently, the social media phenomenon of "Neknominate" has been blamed, due to peer pressure, for promoting irresponsible drinking among the young and even causing deaths.
- 31. Paparazzi, overzealous journalists/photographers, and influencers, among others, really need to consider this point seriously.
- 32. However, this is not the same as merely eliciting consent since a consensual decision does not always make the activity right—there can be consensual consent to do wrong or evil.
- 33. One of the rather unwelcome developments of the facilities of Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube is the rush of some people to upload practically anything or go viral irrespective of the content of the image or information. We have become what has been described as an "oversharing society." Cf. Una Mullaly, "The Oversharing Society" *The Irish Times*, Weekend Review, August 24, 2013. There is a need to educate users about the consequences of their actions for themselves and for viewers—and to awaken their sense of responsibility—before they do so. A particularly informative and sobering documentary, based on real-life experiences, was aired by BBC Channel Four on January 8, 2013, narrated by Yasmin Bannerman and titled: "Don't Blame Facebook."
- 34. There have been legitimate doubts cast about the efficacy in this regard of self-regulation, such as proposed by the media in England. A more realistic perspective is what Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder, is quoted as stating:

"Historically, privacy was almost implicit because it was hard to find and gather information. But in the digital world, whether it's digital cameras or satellites or just what you click on, we need to have more explicit rules – not just for governments but for private companies," Editorial, *Irish Independent*, December 13, 2022

35. A more extensive development of the issues discussed here can be found in my *Society in its Challenges: Philosophical Considerations of Living in Society* (2015) and reviewed by Prof. Brendan Sweetman (2018) in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*.

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