

On Politics- A philosophical dialogue

Clemington: TheDean!, I've been wondering, what is it to be free?

TheDean!: It is everything to be free. Freedom is a thing than which there exists nothing greater or more sacred. Without freedom you are not you, you are not your own person. You are merely a toy the purpose of the existence of which is to satisfy the whims of another. And you can never be too free, nor have too many freedoms. Nor demand more rights and freedoms from those who own you.

Clemington: Those who own me?

TheDean!: Indeed, those who rule the state. The Government. They own you. From them, you are not free. Is it not so that you are bound by their whims?

Clemington: It is so.

TheDean!: Then you are not free?

Clemington: It would seem that way, but I think perhaps I am free within certain limits.

TheDean!: But a limited freedom is not freedom at all.

Clemington: But didn't you yourself once say that we are only free to do that which is possible for us to do? So we are always limited in some way.

TheDean!: But is there not a difference between the boundaries of possibility and the limits and restrictions placed on you by others who would control you?

Clemington: I suppose you are right. To be free then is to have no limits placed on us by others who are, or should be, equal to us? But limits in terms of what is actually possible are different. So, my not being able to fly is not a restriction on my freedom, but my not being able to veto a proposed law is?

TheDean!: It is as you say. If this was not the case, and the boundaries of possibility were in fact limits on your freedom, freedom would not exist. To be free would be to live in a void, with no other being, with no objects, with no concepts of objects, with no language, with no physical matter, with no dimensions, with no colour, with no sound or light, with no surfaces; you yourself would be nothing.

Clemington: So, under that description freedom would be neither possible nor desirable?

TheDean!: Indeed.

Clemington: But we do not have this problem with your idea of freedom. So I ask you again, what is it to be free?

TheDean!: To be free is to have no restrictions placed upon you by others. To be free is to have complete equality. It means no one is more important than anyone else. It means no one can tell you what to do. It means there is no government. Hobbes' power-to-be-in-awe-of would not exist.

Clemington: But isn't this freedom equally impossible and undesirable?

TheDean!: It is not. It is perfectly possible, and it is obviously desirable. Let us consider our political system. We live in a democracy, correct?

Clemington: Correct.

TheDean!: Wrong. We live in an oligarchy. Democracy is power of the people. Do the people have power?

Clemington: I think they do.

TheDean!: But you said before you cannot veto a bill in Parliament.

Clemington: But I can elect those who may do so.

TheDean!: So those who may do so are of more importance than you? Then you are not equals, and you are not free. The players change, but the game remains the same. Those at the top do not change significantly. Either one party is in power, or another. But you and I have no power. We get to choose our oligarchs; isn't it nice of them to let us do so?

Clemington: I am not sure I agree.

TheDean!: Consider the following scenario: you and I are part of a group of oligarchs. We see that all around us, regimes have fallen. It is no longer considered good to be ruled by a monarch or a dictator, by aristocracy, or by oligarchy. The common peasants actually have the audacity to want to rule their own lives! We need to make sure we keep a firm grip on our power. What might we do?

Clemington: We might use force.

TheDean!: No, this is the sort of thing they are rebelling against. We must be more subtle. I ask you: What is it they want?

Clemington: They want to rule themselves, as you said.

TheDean!: They want to see themselves as being free from us. But we want to continue to rule them. Can you suggest some way in which we could both get our wishes?

Clemington: Well, I suppose we could somehow make them think they were free, but actually we would still be in control.

TheDean!: Precisely Clemington. That is exactly what we would do. How would we do that?

Clemington: I do not know.

TheDean!: The hoi polloi want democracy, yes?

Clemington: Yes.

TheDean!: Right, so, would it seem a good idea for us to somehow trick them into thinking they have democracy when indeed they do not? Would not this be the best way to convince them they have power when really they do not?

Clemington: I think it would.

TheDean!: So then, we would create a system which disguised itself as democracy. One in which we oligarchs were still in power, but the people were somehow able to appear to decide things. Perhaps we could let them decide who rules them. They would love this. Surely if you decide who is in charge, you can make sure things are going as you wish.

Clemington: So, we would allow the people to elect us?

TheDean!: Indeed. We would let the people choose which of the hoi oligoi were in power, who held certain governmental posts and things like that. We would hold elections. And, occasionally, we would allow new members to join our group. We would splinter. We would create multiple parties which are fighting against each other competitively for power. But it would always be these parties which held power. It's like wanting to choose which game to play with your friend, and being given the choice between noughts and crosses with you using noughts, or noughts and crosses with you using crosses.

Clemington: This sounds a lot like the political system we have today.

TheDean!: It does indeed. Do you see now that the people do not hold power? I am not suggesting that our made-up story is true. But the result is the same. Do you see that in order to be free, we must have total equality, and we must have no political regime?

Clemington: I do.

TheDean!: So, we have arrived at an answer to your question of what it is to be free?

Clemington: We have.

TheDean!: Are you satisfied?

Clemington: I am not.

TheDean!: Why not? Is there some part of our discussion you have a problem with?

Clemington: No. I am not satisfied because I am not free.

TheDean!: Ah. Can you be free?

Clemington: I think so.

TheDean!: What must be done in order to achieve freedom?

Clemington: We must change our political system. We must allow the people to really have control of themselves. But I do not know how this could be done.

TheDean!: Can you give me an example of a political system which seemed to have tried to give power to the people?

Clemington: Communism?

TheDean!: Quite so. Do you think communism is the solution?

Clemington: I do not. Communism has a leader, and an elite group who hold power, and so this would cause little change from what we have now.

TheDean!: So, you have identified the problem with communism. Try removing it.

Clemington: Remove the leadership?

TheDean!: What are you left with?

Clemington: A people with no ruler. A people who are free.

TheDean!: Is this not what you wanted?

Clemington: It is. But with no leadership at all, nothing could be achieved.

TheDean!: Indeed. Do you want something to be achieved?

Clemington: I think so.

TheDean!: Then will you allow me to suggest something?

Clemington: Indeed I will TheDean!.

TheDean!: Thank you. My suggestion is this: that we live in a sort of anarchist-communist system. Communism has already been identified. Anarchy would be no leadership at all. The problems with both of these have become apparent. So, we go in between. Anarcho-communism. Imagine this: we have a government of sorts. But this government has no authority and no power. They are more like a regulatory body. They would facilitate certain things. We hold elections, once per year, to elect people to this government. Absolutely anyone in the country may stand for absolutely any post, and would pay no fee to do so. This way we may elect those best suited to the job. Alternatively, there is the ancient Athenian way: appointment by lot. Pull names out of a hat and decide who does what. Now, the main function of this body would be to organise voting on issues. Each time there is an issue which needs to be decided, a vote will be held. All the people may vote. But there is no need to do so every time. Voter apathy is not a bad thing. If someone wants to vote on a trivial affair which does not concern me, I need not vote. The power really lies in rejecting something. Negative power. When something I do care about is being voted on, I can vote on it, and I can stop it from happening if I do not like it. This way, the people decide what happens. The government do not.

Clemington: But maybe the government officials would fix the vote?

TheDean!: But do not forget that they leave office after one year. They would not be able to have any type of prolonged vote-rigging regime. It would actually have little benefit.

Clemington: Suppose they also rig the elections for new government officials?

TheDean!: Well, perhaps there could be some check in place. Perhaps no one can hold office two years in a row. And perhaps a new interim government would be appointed to oversee the government elections. This would have a completely different make-up to the government which leaves office.

Clemington: That seems ok then.

TheDean!: So, would you be free?

Clemington: I'm not sure. Would I not still have to abide by a majority decision?

TheDean!: You would not. The system would use consensus voting. Absolutely everyone who wishes to vote on the matter must agree to something before it becomes law. And of course any law can be changed or removed.

Clemington: But then one person could have ultimate power by rejecting everything?

TheDean!: Not quite. A law is something everyone must abide by, no?

Clemington: Yes.

TheDean!: So, if one person does not wish to abide by it, they are not free.

Clemington: I cannot disagree.

TheDean!: So, laws are things which should only exist if everyone agrees to them. In an ideal society, there would be very few laws. Fewer laws means fewer people break the laws. Things which only some people want would not be the law. Everyone must be free to do as they wish. In our current society, laws are actually just used to control us. Do you see that in my ideal society, laws would rarely even be needed? Do you see that if even one person disagrees with a proposed law, it would be unfair to make that law stand?

Clemington: I think I do.

TheDean!: Do not forget that everyone is equal to everyone else individually, but everyone is also equal to everyone else collectively. The wishes of one person count for the same as the wishes of many people, at least when using negative power. Obviously it would be different if one person's wishes overruled everyone else's in positive power. This would lead us back to monarchy or dictatorship.

Clemington: Indeed! And we don't want that! But I think I agree with what you have suggested. But I have one question. Who proposes the laws?

TheDean!: Who do you want to propose the laws?

Clemington: The people.

TheDean!: Then it shall be so. Can anyone propose a law? Can any one person propose something?

Clemington: That seems impractical and it would be a waste of time to vote on something only one person wants.

TheDean!: Might I suggest an alternative?

Clemington: Go ahead TheDean!.

TheDean!: Perhaps I can borrow something from Weimar Germany. That is: a petition of sorts may be signed by a certain number of people (in Germany it was 10% of the population, but I think this is too high. It matters not for our present inquiry). This means that if a certain pre-decided number of people wish for something to be made law, then it must be voted on by the people. Of course, it is not worth giving up just because one person refuses to sign your petition. They may change their minds when the voting happens. But the important point is that laws are not actually needed. You can still abide by your law even if others do not. You have no right to make others do something you like and they don't. Hopefully, people would not even want to propose laws very often, because laws are a blunt axe which hacks off bits of our freedom.

Clemington: So, there would be few laws. And in the rare case when a law is needed, the people can suggest it, and the people can decide if they want it. This seems like a most fair political system
TheDean!.

TheDean!: I think you are right Clemington. Are you satisfied that you would be free in this system?

Clemington: I am.

TheDean!: Then let us lay our inquiry to rest.

Clemington: I have a further question. How shall we achieve this system? How are we to convince a government to give up its power?

TheDean!: This is indeed a problem. No government would voluntarily give up its power. Some type of revolution or uprising would be needed. But I personally cannot condone a violent uprising. And it is very difficult to overthrow a government without using force.

Clemington: Indeed, I do not think we can propose violence as a means to this end.

TheDean!: Indeed not, which means it is impossible to achieve what we desire. But let us consider if we were to use violence. Would this allow us to achieve our aims?

Clemington: Well, if we were to overthrow the government violently, we would gain power.

TheDean!: Indeed, but as we have said, no one gains power with the intention of giving it up, and even if they did, they would surely become corrupted and change their mind. Moreover, consider this: in order to overthrow a regime, we would require an army, yes?

Clemington: I should think so.

TheDean!: So, our army would fight their army, and the nation would become involved in a civil war. But, say we won this battle, and in fact gained power. Now, we do the good thing and give up our power. This would leave a void, would it not?

Clemington: Yes, and then the army we had defeated could regroup and take over again, and choose to either reinstate a civilian government or have military rule, which is the opposite to what we wanted to achieve.

TheDean!: Let me then suggest an alternative: Panarchy. Under this system, governments would become like political churches. Being a citizen of a state would be optional, and you could change states at any time. So, if your government does something you dislike, you may leave the state, and become a member of another, or of none. Or you could set up your own state. Of course, you would not have to relocate to change state. This would create a system wherein the governments would actually be competing with one another to see who could do the most for its citizens. You would not be entirely free because you would still be controlled by a system, but as we said earlier, choosing who controls you can be very useful, and of course, you'd have the option to control yourself instead.

Clemington: I like this idea TheDean!. It seems like it is acceptable to give up some small amount of freedom so we may have better stability within our system. But there is still a problem; would this not be very impractical, with everyone around you being ruled by different states?

TheDean!: Not really. But obviously there would be a lot of technicalities which must be worked out if such a system were to be implemented. Now then, it has just occurred to me that there is one issue we have not considered.

Clemington: What is it?

TheDean!: The economy. I want to consider an ideal economy very briefly. Actually, this would probably be under the anarcho-communist system. A unique blend of anarchy and communism. It would be like the communist maxim: From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. That is the element of communism. But it would not be regulated by an elite group out for personal power; it would be regulated by the people. Barter seems like the best way to do this. Imagine I have chickens and they lay eggs. I give eggs to everyone in my local community, for free. Also, imagine you can provide medical services. You would do so for everyone in your local community, also for free. Everything would be free. Everyone would work for nothing, but they would also get everything they needed, they'd just cut out the middle man: money. Everyone in the community would do everything they could for everyone else. It's kind of like how morality came

about, we evolved to be good to the people we had to live with. It's something similar. Now, how does that sound?

Clemington: It sounds like an ideal economy indeed TheDean!. But would this work under panarchy?

TheDean!: I think it could at least be attempted.

Clemington: I suppose so.

TheDean!: So, has the beast that is your ponderings been slain? May we finally lay our inquiry to rest?

Clemington: I think we may.

TheDean!: Splendid. Good night.

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