

Out of Control

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Taking Liberties with Autonomy During a Pandemic

By Alfie Kohn

Warren Buffett famously commented that when the tide goes out, we can finally see who has been swimming naked. By the same token, when a pandemic arrives, we are confronted with a vivid display of just what kind of society we've really had all along: We see the implications of having lacked a robust public health system or national health care. We truly understand the impact of extreme economic inequality: Even many in the middle-class have been skating close to the edge, just a paycheck or two away from penury. And we get a really good look at our culture's belief systems: the virtually theological devotion to the free market and abhorrence of the public sector, the tendency to worship individual "liberty" and slight the common good.

From a worldwide perspective, the United States is an outlier in its fixation on self-sufficiency. Our ethical code seems to begin and end with noninterference and personal choice. Our suspicion of collective enterprises was apparent to Tocqueville nearly two hundred years ago. Our popular entertainments celebrate heroes acting independently rather than interdependently. In contrast even with other Western

societies, America is defined by an absence of commitment to shared values and to the value of what is shared. We are divided from each other, cast back upon ourselves to the point that it is profoundly unsettling to acknowledge our alienation. Yet we insist this is not a predicament but a choice, evidence not of crisis but of an advanced set of values.

This is the context in which to make sense of today's protesters who angrily demand the right to shop and socialize as they please – even as thousands of people continue to die from a spreading virus. Most people tell pollsters they understand the importance of maintaining social distance until it's safe to resume our lives. But the protesters are a reflection, albeit the sort glimpsed in a fun-house mirror, of our society's entrenched individualism – much as Donald Trump's desperate need to triumph over other people represents an exaggerated version of the American worship of winning. What matters most in this country is each person's freedom to do whatever he wants whenever he wants; this tends to trump community and concern for the welfare of others. As one commentator recently observed, our insistence on “freedom from,” rather than “freedom to,” makes Americans look preposterous and pathological to people around the globe.

What is *not* preposterous or pathological, however, is a desire to experience ourselves as self-determining agents who have a meaningful impact on the things that affect us. In fact, that's what psychologists affiliated with self-determination theory, a framework for understanding motivation,¹ identify as “autonomy,” one of three fundamental human needs. (The others are relatedness [connection to others] and competence [a sense of efficacy as we find or create answers to personally significant questions].) When, as one early researcher put it, we feel like “pawns” rather than “origins” in our lives, our psychological – and even physical – health is likely to suffer. Thus, the anxiety and depression that many people are

reporting these days result not only from financial insecurity, fear of illness, and isolation, but also from our powerlessness over the circumstances in which we find ourselves. And if we're parents, that powerlessness can affect how we treat our children.²

Autonomous people experience their actions as authentic, integrated, willingly enacted. But that doesn't mean they see themselves as separate from others or in opposition to the larger culture. This critical but often-overlooked distinction helps us to make sense of the finding that a need for autonomy is experienced even by people in collectivist societies.³ Selfish individualism, by contrast, is not an ineluctable feature of "human nature." Rather, it represents a corruption of our need to have some say over what happens to us.

In fact, when people are raised without support for their autonomy – overcontrolled by parents and teachers – two things may happen. They may, upon growing up and finding themselves in positions of authority, try to deny others *their* autonomy.⁴ And they may insist on a warped version of self-determination that looks more like selfishness. If they have grown up feeling powerless, they might come to rage against any person who tells them no. They might see any restriction on their personal freedom, even to benefit a larger community, as tantamount to "tyranny." They might insist that their convenience takes precedence over other people's immune-compromised vulnerability.⁵ "The hell with their safety; *I* want to go bowling and get a haircut *right now!*"

And, sadly, they won't be alone. Elsewhere, their behavior would likely be condemned as infantile and depraved. But it may attract likes and views and retweets in a country with a history of privileging libertarian self-interest and individual financial gain over social connection and collective well-being. Hence a recent *Onion* headline: "Dr.

Fauci Warns of Needless Suffering and Death If America Allowed to Continue.”

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If our first challenge is to distinguish between autonomy and selfish individualism, our second is to figure out how to negotiate a depressing situation where we feel powerless for good reason. As I write this, in May 2020, more than a third of a million deaths⁶ have been officially attributed to Covid-19, and experts tell us the actual number is far higher. This creates a temptation to displace our anxiety by blaming the officials and scientists who are trying to protect us.

More generally, during prolonged crises, psychiatrist Sim King says people “feel torn between wanting to resist their new reality [and adapting] to it. They may torment themselves trying to preserve normalcy [and] counting down the days to its return – as many are now.” Or, alternatively, they may come to accept their lack of control, make plans only provisionally (resigned to the possibility that expectations will be shattered), and just live in the moment. The latter posture – making one’s peace with what seems to be beyond one’s control – sounds adaptive and wise. But it also calls to mind the reaction that Martin Seligman famously called “learned helplessness”: Once we conclude that nothing we do matters, we give up and lapse into self-defeating depression.

Remember Sisyphus, condemned for all eternity to muscle his rock up the mountain only to have it slip from his grasp and roll back down so he must begin again? In Camus’ reimagining of that myth, Sisyphus’s challenge – and his triumph – consists of facing the absurd futility of his plight rather than clinging to the hope that either his endless futile labor would end at some point or that it wasn’t actually futile after all. He understood that it contained no hidden meaning and would yield no satisfying resolution. And in this sense, the “absence of hope...has nothing to do with despair,” Camus

argued; rather, it bespeaks “alert awareness” and a refusal to lie to oneself.

Camus’s essay focused on what he called metaphysical rebellion. It wasn’t about taking a stand against a political foe or an oppressive institution where success was possible. The Sisyphean situation he had in mind was the human condition itself: the finality of death and the awful truth that all meanings and values are humanly created and therefore fallible, much as we might want to believe otherwise (out of desperation, not evidence). Still, Camus’s point also pertains to certain realities within our lives: the importance of seeing clearly and rejecting facile invocations of “hope.”



Think about it this way: The word *accept* has two very different meanings. It can refer either to acknowledging that something is true or to endorsing it as desirable. Camus is reminding us that we need to “accept” unpleasant realities in the first sense (resisting the urge to wish them away) but not in the second sense (because we should never stop being outraged by what is outrageous).⁷

During this devastating pandemic, we need to somehow steer a course between denial, on the one hand, and passivity, on the other – or at least figure out how to make sure that a sense

of helplessness doesn't spill into other parts of our lives. That starts with a commitment to Camus's "alert awareness": doing our best to accurately understand where things stand and what can be reasonably expected rather than allowing our vision to be distorted by despair... or by hope.⁸ And perhaps we then move on to collective effort – political activism – in response to avoidable deaths. To do so is to follow the evolution of Camus's own thinking, from the lone rebel of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to what he later described (in *The Plague* and his lengthy nonfiction essay *The Rebel*) as participation in a community, taking action with and for others against an implacable foe.

Freedom is about empowering *us*, fulfilling *our* (not just my) need for autonomy. To be sure, it is clearly an uphill struggle to feel a sense of control at a time like this. But at least we can take care not to confuse that concept with either selfishness or self-deception.

NOTES

1. Even as you read this, SDT is serving as the basis for new research to help make sense of how people function in a pandemic.

2. SDT-affiliated researchers have shown (in a 2019 Belgian study) that when parents feel "pressured, inadequate, and isolated," they have less energy for their child and are more likely to "impose their own agenda on their child" rather than supporting his or her autonomy. And a 2020 Canadian study demonstrated that "when parents perceive threats in their children's current and future environment, they can feel pressured to become involved with their children in a more controlling way," which "can negatively affect children's motivation."

3. A 2018 review of three dozen studies confirmed that the correlation between autonomy and happiness is just as strong in the East as in the West; earlier research, meanwhile, showed that being pressured or controlled “frustrates individuals’ universal need for volitional functioning” – and that was no less true in non-Western societies.

4. Researchers have discovered that “individuals who are unsure of their own power, when placed in a position of nominal authority, are the ones who are most likely to rely on coercive control tactics” (Daphne Blunt Bugental et al., “Who’s the Boss?”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72 [1997], p. 1298).

5. I don’t mean to suggest that this is *all* that’s going on now. Protests against shutdowns and social-distancing orders are motivated by more than individualism and selfishness. On the one hand, there are strong currents of understandable fear and financial desperation. On the other hand, these public demonstrations also have ugly crosscurrents of racism, demands for unrestricted access to guns, and far-right conspiratorial fantasies. Featuring overwhelmingly white crowds, they began right around the time that it became clear those succumbing to the virus are disproportionately people of color.

6. I think it’s important to keep our attention focused on the *worldwide* impact of the pandemic; to habitually cite U.S.-specific statistics may imply that the loss of an American life is more of a tragedy than the loss of a life elsewhere.

7. In his later novel, *The Plague* (translated by Stuart Gilbert, Vintage Books, 1947/1972), Camus tells us that the pestilence killing people is “an absurd situation, but...we’ve got to accept it as it is” (p. 79) – meaning see it clearly – rather than taking refuge in unjustified hope, faith (which is, by definition, belief without evidence), or magical thinking. (News is not “fake” just because you don’t like it; reports of contagion risk and mortality are not “fear-

mongering” just because they’re upsetting.) But that doesn’t mean we should “accept” the situation in the other sense of the word: “A fight must be put up” (p. 122) and even the fact that “victories will never be lasting” is “no reason for giving up the struggle” (p. 118). Incidentally, when Camus talks about metaphysical rebellion, he is not proposing that we rage impotently and consign ourselves to lifelong negativity. Rather, he urges us to embrace life – to love, create, affirm, “give the void its colors” – but to do so as a kind of revolt, in defiance of the ultimate meaninglessness of our condition.

8. Elsewhere, I’ve argued for a similar reality-based response as an alternative not only to chronic negativity but also to an unjustified posture of indiscriminate gratitude.

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