RIGHTS AND THEIR INTRUSION ON FREEDOM IN AMERICA

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By

Valerie Lubin, M.B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
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ABSTRACT

Principles of rights and freedom are deeply engrained in the United States of America. From the Declaration of Independence, to the Constitution, and current customs, the country prides itself in being the land of the free, where rights exist for all. Through a combination of disciplined self-reliance and cooperation, the American people have achieved prosperity, positioning the country as an international leader, offering many opportunities to achieve success. However, our nation today faces serious wealth and opportunity inequalities that are defying our common view and exercise of rights along with freedom. Indeed, studies show that as wealth continues to increase for a few and remains concentrated in the top one percentile of the population, so does the number of low-income households, as income remains unchanged or insufficiently increases to help those families cover current living expenses. Research also reveals that financial status impacts access to education, as well as the level and quality of education, with more affluent families being most likely to complete higher education compared to their
poor counterparts. This thesis argues that because our society is more oriented towards self-interest than common good, our current interpretation and exercise of freedom and rights are inadequate to surmount our income and opportunity crises. The thesis therefore explores different conceptions of freedom, the first being from the philosophical movement, existentialism which states that freedom is man’s ability to take responsibility for the meaning of his own life. Renown existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that freedom makes man responsible not just for himself, but for the world, and that in choosing what is good for him, he must choose what is good for all. Simone Weil presents a related view of freedom by emphasizing the existence of certain needs of the human soul such as needs for equality and hierarchy, obedience and liberty, truth and freedom of expression, privacy and social life, private and public properties. She also asserts that a free society is one where every measure is taken to satisfy those needs, seeing them as impersonal obligations to be met, distinct from and prior to rights, which are self-interested and not based on what is impersonal and sacred in every human being. Guided by Sartre and Weil’s views, the thesis ends by recommending that any solution to resolve our socioeconomic problems begin with a reassessment of our general understanding of rights and freedom, by divorcing the two in order to better identify and comprehend others’ limited freedom and how we contribute to it. As Sartre and Weil explain, understanding our freedom as a responsibility to ourselves and everyone else can help us think of our obligations towards one another, instead of primarily focusing on securing our personal rights and liberties.
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INTRODUCTION

Freedom is a state of being we value as much, if not more, than life itself without necessarily being able to define it with exactitude; for depending on the time, place, culture, collective and individual values, freedom is understood, pursued and lived differently. In the United States, freedom and rights go hand in hand and the two terms are used interchangeably, as evidenced in our Constitution. Indeed, the Constitution’s First Amendment expresses certain individual rights as freedoms, for example, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of assembly; and as stated in the Constitution’s preamble, the nation’s founders established those rights and freedoms not only to ensure individual wellbeing, but also to secure the common good and welfare of society. Although we have indeed become one of the most prosperous sovereign states and are known as the leader of the free world, one might plausibly ask whether American constitutional rights, as we understand and exercise them, are truly what secure personal freedom, or posed differently, whether one is free merely by virtue of having said rights, especially given other people’s inherent and unavoidable involvement in either sustaining or violating those rights. The question becomes even more problematic when one considers that in recent decades, despite our interdependency among ourselves, American society has increasingly become more self-interested. Scholars such as Robert Putnam have pointed that our choices have become more “me” oriented, and authors Joseph Goddard and Russell Duncan have also noted that the ethic in the American workplace is predominantly marked by a “winner take all” mentality
which benefits the most successful while leaving the majority of workers struggling to keep afloat.¹ Those observations indicate a departure from the Constitution’s purpose of maintaining society’s wellbeing as a whole. What path led us to arrive at this society of individual silos, and what role, if any, did our general understanding of the relationship between freedom and rights play in getting us to this point?

The following thesis aims to investigate the above questions by first exploring the early concepts and evolution of democracy in the United Stated in Chapter 1. To that end, I will rely primarily on Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* to examine how concepts of rights and freedom have been perceived and implemented during the nation’s infancy, leading to its successful development and emancipation. Chapter 2 will examine the pitfalls and failures of our democracy by exploring deep inequalities afflicting many in our society. Borrowing from *Democracy in America*, Robert Putnam’s works such as *Bowling Alone* and *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, along with other pertinent scholarly literature, I will compare conceptions of community held during the early days of the nation’s birth to modern day community practices in order to emphasize how far we have strayed from those early principles of collective wellbeing. Based on those discussions I will argue that our current social practices overemphasize the protection and exercise of individual rights to the detriment of our fulfilment of a strictly limited but absolutely fundamental set of human obligations that must be met in order to ensure the unconditional human dignity of each and every person, and I will show that such

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obligations are necessary to achieve any form of collective welfare. To support my argument, in Chapter 3, I will first present French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre’s view of freedom as a responsibility for one’s self and for all others. I will then build on his position to show that our liberty should lead us to choose to meet elementary human obligations, as another French philosopher, Simone Weil explains, the fulfillment of those obligations she believes as necessary to achieve authentic freedom. Lastly, in Chapter 4, I will juxtapose Sartre and Weil’s convictions to the United States’ contemporary narrative to demonstrate how our rights in America at times work in opposition to freedom and contribute to the problems identified in Chapter 2. The chapter will conclude by proposing a first and necessary step to any envisaged remediation to our inequality crises, that step being that we reconsider our current views and practices of rights as they relate to freedom by separating the two concepts. I will also underline the importance of an education in humanities to be able to undertake the proposed reevaluation.

It is my goal that upon reading the paper, readers will be reminded of their ability and power to affect good. I hope that they will also remember that our individual wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of all, and therefore necessitates that we look beyond our social and financial comforts where they exist, in order to attain complete and authentic freedom which can only be achieved through respect and sustenance of each fellow human being’s dignity and livelihood.
Chapter 1

Rights and Freedom in the United States

Democratic Roots

Understanding concepts of rights and freedom in the United States of America requires that we travel back to the early birth stages of the nation, when the first English settlers arrived in North America and began establishing colonies at the beginning of the 17th century. Because of England’s political history, those immigrants were well acquainted with principles of liberty and rights. Indeed, Magna Carta Libertatum, or simply Magna Carta, was a charter issued on June 15, 1215 by King John of England, which provided early formulations of rights and liberties in England. The sixty-three chapters of the legal document, among other things, addressed securing church rights, as well as free men’s rights such as the right to bear arms. It also contained guidelines that protected workers from degrading labor and punishment, as well as from unfair property seizure, while establishing fair judgement proceedings. Similar to most official and legal guiding documents, Magna Carta underwent iterations throughout its evolution. Nonetheless, in this 13th century document one can already perceive the seed for many of the tenets found in the 18th century American Constitution. It was thus imbued with those

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3 Ibid.
early conceptions of freedom and rights that the first English immigrants disembarked in the early 1600s on the shores of North America, which was then known as the New World. But as anyone aware of American history knows, there were stark differences which led to friction between those who established themselves in the northern part of the land and those who settled in southern colonies.

Virginia was the first established English colony in the early 1600s, with the first settlers being primarily gold-seekers and miners of lower classes, whom Tocqueville describes as lacking standards such as a proper education, and whose primary aspiration was to accrue wealth. On the other hand, the English who landed in the North, later known as New England, were wealthier and better educated settlers who, per Tocqueville, were seeking to further explore and broaden their intellectual horizons. The historian explains that as soon as the northern settlers arrived, they organized themselves into a society governed by moral, religious, civic and political codes that reflected principles of liberty and democracy that helped shape the nation’s character. All the British settlers, whether from the northern or southern part of the land, had recourse to slave trading as a primary source of labor, starting with native tribes, then moving to the international trade of Africans. Indeed, thanks to slavery, colonies from Maine to Georgia prospered with considerable economic development in agriculture, which led to steady

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5 Ibid., 35-39.
immigration and a higher demand for slaves. As a matter of fact, a study conducted by historian Edmund Morgan showed a correlation between liberty and equality in America and slavery, with liberty expanding for whites the more they enslaved Africans.

In describing the nature and character of early American society, French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville observes that in America, the development of smaller moral and ethical communities was prioritized, with mores permeating the affairs of the bigger counties which in turn were developed and later contributed to general statehood. Indeed in New England, political and social organizations in towns took great care in articulating each commune’s duties towards its members, from establishing provisions for the poor and public education, to enforcing guidelines pertaining to road maintenance, property and inheritance laws. With regards to education, the edification and proper maintenance of schools were required in each municipality, otherwise its inhabitants suffered hefty penalties. Similarly, local officials had a duty to see that all parents ensure that their children attend those schools. One notices the strong emphasis placed on the exercise of obligations among the immigrants toward their community, and hence towards one another in order to develop and sustain prosperous townships. This phenomenon of helping others as a means of also helping oneself, although not new to human society, Tocqueville describes as very pronounced in American society, so much so that he coins

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7 Ibid.
8 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 44-45.
9 Ibid.
it “self-interest properly understood.”10 The principle of “self-interest properly understood” implies that in a community where all inhabitants are equal, free and have rights, each individual, in order to protect his own rights and liberties, will do what is necessary to nurture and uphold those rights, thereby respecting others’ freedom and rights, while at the same time refraining from violating them. Viewing rights and freedom through those lenses, let us examine the first two amendments from our Constitution’s Bill of Rights:

Amendment I

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Amendment II

A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.11

In reading those amendments, we note that expressions and terms such as “shall make no law…prohibiting…abridging the freedom of speech…shall not be infringed” all denote a sort of warning, abstaining tone that seems to be reminding us to exercise control and respect towards laws and rights that benefit us as much individually as collectively.

American society, historically, has therefore been one where one cooperates with his neighbor and fellow citizens, because in addition to being the Christian and moral thing

10 Ibid., 525-527.

to do, it also constitutes an act of self-love, benefiting one’s own interests. It therefore comes as no surprise that in democratic nations where equality, personal liberties and rights are vital for communal wellbeing, individualism is present. Nevertheless, freedom has not necessarily been viewed as an individual notion, and in the next section we explore different conceptions of freedom in early America from the perspective of historical figures.

DIFFERENT HISTORICAL VIEWS OF FREEDOM

A penchant toward individualism is inevitable in any democratic society because, as I have said thus far, democratic conditions of freedom and rights foster in people a sense of autonomy and self-reliance which is synonymous with individualism. Therefore, understanding American freedom requires that we pay attention to the evolution of individualism throughout the country’s history.

The term individualism was first used in the early 19th century by Tocqueville to describe the American people; however, its underlying theory and principles originated in England, inspired by early formulations of rights and liberties in Magna Carta as discussed earlier in the chapter, and explicitly formulated with the emergence of Protestantism, which the English people associated with each individual’s dignity and freedom to control his life.\(^{12}\) At that time, one of England’s most revered philosophers,

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John Locke, articulated the dignity that is inherent to each man, and voiced the rights which are natural consequences of said dignity, such as the right to pursue happiness, to work towards a project such as owning property or another personal achievement, and the right to freedom of religion.\textsuperscript{13} In colonial America, Locke’s views on individualism inspired politicians such as Thomas Jefferson who, in 1776, drafted the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”\textsuperscript{14}

Although individualism is characteristic of American freedom, it is important to note that freedom does not equate to individualism. For example, the first elected governor of Massachusetts, the Puritan John Winthrop described success as being tied to the formation of ethical communities and believed that true freedom was of a moral and ethical nature that conveys what “is good, just and honest.”\textsuperscript{15} Tocqueville takes note of that sense of responsibility and morality, and understands it as the natural consequence of fervent religious mores that the immigrants who settled in New England brought with them from England. In fact, the historian remarks that “Religion is considered the guardian of mores, and mores are regarded as the guarantee of the laws as pledge for the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 90-91.


maintenance of freedom itself.” One of the country’s founding fathers and its third president, Thomas Jefferson, believed that freedom was its truest in a society where educated people led a certain way of life and were involved in government, a sentiment that another founding father and sixth president of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin shared. Nevertheless, as advocated in his book, Poor Richard’s Almanack, Franklin saw self-reliance as the essential characteristic for getting ahead in America and becoming wealthy. Franklin, in that regard exemplifies individualism or specifically, utilitarian individualism, a notion that suggests that social good naturally occurs in a society where each arduously pursues his own interests. That utilitarian view is not unlike Tocqueville’s “self-interest properly understood.” It must be noted, nonetheless, that there is a difference between Tocqueville’s observed behavior and the individualist attitude, for while the former ideology relied on helping others as a means to also help one’s self, the latter essentially called for each to help himself first. The distinction here is important because, although aiming at the same outcome, namely the greater good for all, the emphasis is on different actors for each of those views. As individualism continued to evolve, certain members of American society in the middle of the 19th century believed that the pursuit of one’s own material interests did not leave much room for self-discovery and emancipation, therefore writers and philosophers such as Thoreau,

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16 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 47.

17 Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart, 31, 32.
Emerson and Hawthorne reacted by developing a more expressive form of individualism that called attention to finding, cultivating and celebrating one’s inner self and mind.\textsuperscript{18}

Today, we continue to value those principles of self-reliance and individualism as we aim for success and celebrate our individuality. Nonetheless, despite being reflected in visions held by our nation’s pioneers of moral, educated and politically involved citizens, the need for the other is less emphasized in our current society. That oversight notwithstanding, the fact remains that without the other there cannot be a community, and without a community, the individual cannot exist. Therefore, the democratic characteristics of liberty and equality which are necessary to develop a sense of self and pursue individual happiness, are also necessary to keep individuals within the boundaries of the community and the common good. Otherwise, as Tocqueville points out, when man becomes dominated by his individuality, he is solely preoccupied with himself, his material well-being and achieving uniformity in public affairs.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, the historian warns that those three preoccupations are conducive to despotism, because a man who is obsessed with his wealth, at the prospect of increasing it, runs the risk of prioritizing commerce over political affairs.\textsuperscript{20} Second, the man who is only concerned with his own affairs is at risk of shutting himself from the world, indifferent to his neighbors’ needs, as

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 33-35.

\textsuperscript{19} L. Joseph Herbert, Jr., \textit{More than Kings and Less than Men} (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 94-95.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 94.
he gladly relinquishes control of political affairs to others.\textsuperscript{21} Lastly, the extreme individualist seeks uniformity in public affairs because he resents any form of privilege from which he is not benefiting. He, therefore, may be tempted to favor concentration of power and total dependence on a despotic form of government over mutual independence from which another profits more than he.\textsuperscript{22}

Just as individual happiness should not harm society, public opinion and public affairs should also operate in a manner as to not suppress personal liberties and rights. In summary, to avoid tyranny and maintain equality, we need engaged communities; we need each other. In the United States, the First Amendment, which protects the freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, press and petition, constitutes an example of both individualism and a guarding mechanism because it not only affirms people’s personal liberties, it also makes them responsible for looking after the affairs of their society, thus requiring their collaboration. As a matter of fact, some of the nation’s great successes, which I summarize next, with the exception of early economic prosperity at the cost of enslaving people, attest to the merit of a democratic society where balance is achieved between self-reliance and a people’s ability to cooperate with one another.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 94-95.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 95.
SUCCESSES AND BREAKTHROUGHS

The United States’ greatest achievements can be said to speak for themselves. As I mentioned earlier, the first settlers, whether gold seekers, miners, farmers or noblemen, all arrived with the goal of achieving some form of prosperity, which for some meant intellectual flourishing while for others, wealth accumulation. Both kinds of successes have been achieved as the country’s industrialization, commerce and scientific developments have and continue to position the nation as a world leader. The industrial revolution during the 17th and 18th centuries completely changed the marketplace by introducing machines to replace many manual tasks, mass manufacturing, chemical, textile and iron production processes which all combined to boost the development of industrial capitalism in the North.23 For example, by the middle of the 19th century, the United States effectively operated the most merchant ships in the world, and New York City, with trading platforms such the New York Stock Exchange, became the world’s most important financial center.24 Today, the U.S continues to be one of the world’s leaders in technology and the global marketplace, with a strong presence in the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, as well as in economic and political affairs with other nations.25

23 Turner, Magna Carta, 13-14, 54.
24 Ibid., 54-55.
Women’s suffrage is another notable accomplishment towards rights and freedom in the United States. The industrial revolution provided women, who historically had been considered homemakers, with work opportunities, although wages were much lower than those earned by male workers. Realizing the stark inequalities in the workforce as well as in political affairs, women throughout the country, sustained protests from the 1830s and after much struggle, women’s suffrage was finally obtained in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th amendment of the Constitution, which forbids the denial or abridging of the right to vote on the basis of sex.\(^\text{26}\)

The abolition of slavery, although tardy and very debatable in its attainment and implementation in America, constitutes a major advancement in any democratic nation promoting equality of rights and liberties. Because southern states were highly dependent on slave labor for their economic success, the South was recalcitrant and slower to abolish slavery than the North; however between the time the Constitution was ratified in 1789 and 1860, slavery was gradually abolished.\(^\text{27}\)

In 21st century USA, one could argue that freedom, particularly freedom of expression, is at its fullest. Indeed, in addition to music, literature, television and movies, the progress made with communication technologies such as the Internet with the proliferation of social media outlets has enabled us to “connect,” “follow,” and “like” anything or anyone from almost anywhere. In that regard, the Internet has engendered a

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 143.

new form of community, the cyber community, where people can partake and share common or divergent interests and opinions. Indeed, we can quickly create and spread awareness surrounding particular issues, and more importantly, we can express ourselves. We think of our Facebook, Instagram, Twitter accounts as potent avenues to rebel against, or rally supporters for a cause; we conduct commerce, promote goods and services, discover future Hollywood stars, raise funds etc. In fact, many other countries look to us as a role model for freedom of expression.

Principles of rights and liberty drove America’s first settlers to work towards acquiring and multiplying private properties, to develop commerce and trading, to provide for themselves, their families and their communities, in short, to continuously strive for success and financial wealth. In American society today, and in Western culture in general, we continue to strive to reach a certain level of success that is intrinsically tied to financial stability and comfort. Other nations have looked to the United States, as the leader of the free world, to our democratic model and capitalist market system in order to develop their own economy and wealth. The democratic creed of equal opportunity has and continues to embolden each man to pursue his interests and happiness, leading the nation to be known as the land of opportunity. However, that credo has also caused our country to be labelled as the land that embodies Darwin’s principle of survival of the fittest. Indeed, for all the opportunities summarized above, that as a nation we have created and capitalized on, we have also hurt ourselves as a people by often failing to minimize obstacles that can be encountered in the pursuit of happiness. In the following chapter, I examine those obstacles by discussing American democracy’s shortcomings.
and failures as embodied in equality and opportunity gaps, investigating the causes and effects of the American paradox that is the struggle to survive in a land of opportunity.
CHAPTER 2
WHERE FREEDOM WENT WRONG

IINDIVIDUAL LIBERTY BEFORE COMMON GOOD

Many of us who were born and/or raised in the United States grew up witnessing and aiming for the sort of success described in Chapter 1, namely a career by which to earn money, save and invest in stocks, own a home, provide for a family, and one day, comfortably retire. That ideal has been inculcated in us through various channels including school, family and culture; it is part of our personhood and identity, with our parents and educators guiding us through the process of living the American dream. Indeed, as the nation evolves, many of us have and continue to reach those milestones, often times surpassing our parents’ success, regardless of our socio-economic background.

In his 2015 book, Our Kids: the American Dream in Crisis, American political scientist, Robert Putnam offers a few examples of individuals of all walks of life who have achieved success in America during the first half of the 20th century. Such is the case for Don in 1950s Port Clinton, Ohio, who grew up in the poorest part of town, and whose parents, despite their modest means, encouraged him to attend college, as did their church pastor who even assisted Don in obtaining financial aid. After obtaining his degree, Don married a high school teacher, had a child who became a librarian, and later
on, he was able to retire from a fulfilling ministering career.¹ There was also Frank, who unlike Don, came from a wealthy family in 1950 Port Clinton, but whose family also motivated him to attend college. He graduated with a bachelor degree in journalism, served in the military and subsequently had a career as an editor for a newspaper until his retirement.² In addition to economic differences between Don and Frank, we all know that racial disparities were very prominent in the nation during the 1950s; however, Putnam notes that even then, his only two black classmates in Port Clinton, Cheryl and Jesse lived accomplished lives similar to those of their white peers.³ That last fact needs emphasizing for at least two reasons. First, it must be noted that, back at a time when segregation and racial discrimination were plaguing our society, the fact that people of other races such as blacks were successful, shows that inequality in the United States, though affected by race, exists beyond racial issues and other factors like gender. As obvious as that fact is, it can quickly get lost in or be confined to discussions that primarily focus on, or only define disparities in society with respect to only one factor such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, marital status, etc. The second reason for stressing that success transcends race is a direct result of the first reason: namely, that once one understands the complete state of inequality in our country, one can better dissect its different components and grasp its relationship to racism as well as to the other contributing factors enumerated above. Later in the chapter, I shall further

² Ibid., 5-6.
³ Ibid., 12-13.
elaborate on the sources of inequality in our country, but for now, let us forward to modern day America, and contemplate more recent success stories.

In the 21st century, Don’s and Frank’s success stories continue to be replicated in different parts of the country, again transcending socioeconomic, gender and race barriers. This was the case for Chelsea, a teenage girl in 2010’s Port Clinton, who was very involved in school clubs and events, and whose affluent and influential mother, Wendy never hesitated to use her influence to help her kids succeed. In fact, Wendy emphasized the importance of education and taught her children how to read before they reached kindergarten so they could get a head start in their schooling. She also organized posh themed birthday parties for Chelsea, went to her daughter’s school to request that the latter be nominated for a scholarship, and she encouraged both her kids to work in order to earn some cash and learn the importance of money. Chelsea’s narrative is reminiscent, if not of our own, of at least a relative, friend or acquaintance’s life and path to success. However, many kids do not live the American dream as Chelsea’s family did, as skewed social and economic conditions are making that dream increasingly inaccessible. To illustrate that point, Putnam uses the case of 18-year old David in 2012 Port Clinton. David had a troubled childhood, marked by an often incarcerated father, by an environment where drugs were being used, and by a lack of family and community emotional support. He got into trouble, dropped out of school, and struggled to provide for his siblings and young daughter whose mother was a drug addict. Desperation even

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4 Ibid., 24-25.
drove the young man to utter on his Facebook page, “I’ll never get ahead!”\(^5\) Sadly, David’s story is that of many youths turned adults in America, who are living proof that inequalities exist and are widening with time, and that communities are breaking down. For instance, Census Bureau data gathered in metropolitan cities with a population under 500,000 inhabitants, showed that between 1970 and 2009, the number of families living in affluent neighborhoods increased, as did the number of families who lived in poor neighborhoods, while the number of families in moderate income families decreased, thus clearly indicating expanding socioeconomic inequalities.\(^6\) From an education perspective, a study that followed the educational trajectory of a group of high school sophomores between 2002 and 2012 revealed that, 92% of kids from the highest socioeconomic quartile graduated from high school, with 89% enrolling in college within two years of graduation, and 58% of them obtaining a bachelor’s degree within six years of starting college. However, the statistics were much lower for poorer kids of whom 64% graduated from high school, with only 46% attending college and 12% obtaining a degree within six years.\(^7\)

From the above numbers, it would appear that the days when Tocqueville witnessed that community leaders and members were accountable for the education and well-being of all are long gone. As a matter of fact, as we shall further develop later on, as the country accrues more wealth, that wealth remains concentrated among few.

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\(^5\) Ibid., 26-29.

\(^6\) Ibid., 38.

\(^7\) Ibid., 188-189.
Meanwhile, many in the population struggle simply to gain access to the basics necessary
for any possibility of a successful life, and those of us who are more fortunate to live
comfortable lives are either complacent or feel powerless to attempt to level the playing
field.

In *Our Kids*, Putnam illustrates our complacency using his hometown Port
Clinton, where in the past two decades, while rich attorneys, physicians and business
people from Midwest major cities established primary, secondary or retirement homes,
the economy and employment plummeted, delinquency and school dropouts escalated,
thereby illustrating the collapse of the working class as a new upper class emerged. In
addition to being unconcerned, some among the well-to-do, such as Wendy are doubtful
of special government funding towards community programs such as those geared toward
educating poor children, partly because they believe that one should work to get one’s
own piece of the pie and become rich, embodying the self-reliant view of freedom
discussed earlier in the first chapter. Another reason why people are reluctant to buy into
funding community programs is the lack of trust in community officials to use those
funds appropriately or as promised. Indeed, cases arise quite often of company or
government officials misappropriating company funds and tax-payer dollars;
consequently, we can understandably justify our refusal to get involved and share our
hard earned money. Nevertheless, approximately 90% of Americans, regardless of
background and political views, say they support more spending on education in order to

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8 Ibid., 21-22.
9 Ibid., 25.
ensure that each has a fair chance to succeed, and 95% of us agree that everyone in the country should have said fair chance.\textsuperscript{10} Interestingly, although most are in concert on the matter, only 48\% of those with the highest socioeconomic status strongly agree compared to 70\% of those in the bottom quintile, thus indicating that the wealthier one is, the lower are the chances of him or her “strongly” accepting that what is necessary be done in order to offer an equal opportunity to each for succeeding.\textsuperscript{11} Put differently, those statistics seem to indicate that the better off a person is, the lower the likelihood of that person practicing Tocqueville’s “self-interest properly understood”. Be that as it may, the fact remains that regardless of our personal convictions and reluctances, rights and freedoms are not equally available to all, and the next sections examine two forms of inequality ravaging our nation, namely, wealth/income inequality, and opportunity inequality.

**WEALTH AND INCOME INEQUALITY**

In the United States, as in all other countries, there exists some inequality of income and wealth, and understandably so. We generally do not expect a physician to earn the same salary as a school teacher, nor an electrician to make the same amount of money as a teenage part-time babysitter. Connections and discrimination asides, we all know that one’s earnings are subject to their field of work, their level of expertise within

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Field} & \textbf{Average Salary} \\
\hline
Medical Doctor & $300,000 \\
Teacher & $35,000 \\
Electrician & $38,000 \\
Babysitter & $7.25 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Average Salaries by Profession}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
that field, their location and economic principles of supply and demand. As far as poverty is concerned, although existent, it has been found to be slowly decreasing since the second half of the 20th century with women, especially married women entering the labor force. Nonetheless, Putnam’s research shows that starting in the 1980’s, the income gap began to rise substantially and that at the start of the 21st century, within the top decile, the top percentile of the wealthiest pulled further away from the rest. Indeed, professor and economist, Emmanuel Saez published data that indicate that in 2015, the top 10% of households in the United States with a pre-tax income greater than $125,000 held 50.5% of income shares, and furthermore, within that group, the top one percent, i.e. households earning more than $443,000, increased their shares by over 20% compared to the top 1-5% which grew by approximately 17% and the top 5-10% which increased by 12%. Per Putnam’s findings, between 1979 and 2005, while the average annual after-tax income rose by $900 for the bottom fifth of American households, it grew by $8,700 for the middle fifth and by $745,000 for the top one percent, with the average after-tax income for the latter group further increasing by 31% between 2005 and 2012, while remaining practically unchanged for others.

Studies have shown that those substantial income inequalities affect the inherent

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right that all men have to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, because those inequalities, for an increasing number of low-income people, render access to crucial life components such as healthcare and education very difficult. For instance, research published in 2017 shows that life expectancy for wealthy men and women increased between the 1990s and the early 2000s while remaining unchanged for poor men, and declining for poor women.\textsuperscript{16} The study reveals a positive relationship between increases in income and survival rate. Indeed, in 2001, female survival rate increased by 1.7 years for every log-point of income, a log-point indicating an increase factor of 2.7, further increasing to 2.4 years per log-point in 2014.\textsuperscript{17} For men, in 2001, the survival gradient increased to 3.2 years per log-point and further to 3.7 per log-point in 2014.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, medical costs covered by insurance companies have been reduced with time, shifting more of the payment responsibility to the insured, and making it even more difficult for lower-income households to access medical care.\textsuperscript{19} The Affordable Care Act was signed into law in 2010 to expand health insurance coverage to more Americans, and help alleviate out-of-pocket healthcare costs for consumers. Nevertheless, with most of its provisions coming into force in 2014, and the transition to a new presidency and government as of 2017, the federal statute’s effects are questionable, especially with respect to increased access to healthcare for lower-income households.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 1479.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 1486-1487.
Reflecting on the country’s general belief in each person’s willingness and ability to drive his success, it would appear that with passing years, we have created an environment that keeps pushing the boundaries of what it means to be prosperous in the United States of America, and we have equated success to the continual accrual of wealth, all the while remaining oblivious to the fact that we do so at the cost of opportunities for others. Certainly philanthropists abound among millionaires and billionaires, and individuals such as Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey and Chobani CEO, Hamdi Ulukaya along with middle-class households make significant contributions to improving communities. However, while those benefactors definitely make a positive impact, their contributions are not sufficient to reverse the broader trend because, as we have shown, the income gap continues to widen.

Scholars and economists continue to research the causes for wealth inequality and so far, some experts have advanced many contributing factors such as technological developments that are changing the nature of work, executive compensation, shifting social culture and norms, government policies, globalization, and education levels. Of all those factors, particular attention should be paid to education, as it is a building block of any community. In Chapter 1, I explained that in the early days of American society, children’s school attendance was mandatory in each district and punishable by fines if neglected. Presently, however, as demonstrated next, any discussion of education in our

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21 Putnam, Our Kids, 35.
country is directly linked to an opportunity gap that is often related to wealth inequality, for just as education levels may limit or expand income, so too, do low income levels limit access to education.

OPPORTUNITY INEQUALITY

In Putnam’s words, equal opportunity is determined by whether younger generations of various backgrounds are “getting onto the ladder at about the same place, and, given equal merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it.”22 One hardly needs to be reminded of the opportunity gap that runs in the U.S., however many of us may not realize just how deeply it runs until we become aware of the exaggerated income gap between the top one percent and the remainder of the population, the bottom barely, if ever, getting a decent pay increase to cope with costs of living. Most people with low incomes live in poorer neighborhoods with neglected school systems. Given that where one lives impacts how he or she experiences life, people living in destitute and neglected neighborhoods where crime, delinquency, school dropouts and teen pregnancies are prevalent, and where health infrastructure and civic engagement are lacking, cannot be expected to understand and practice self-reliance in the same manner as a person living in a more affluent part of town. Although some children in poorer neighborhoods do become successful and wealthy, it is not the case, however for the vast majority of children. As Putnam notes, class-based residential segregation since the 1970’s directly

22 Ibid., 31.
impacts the school systems.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, more than test scores and grades, a family’s socio-economic status nowadays is indicative of whether its children will attend and graduate college. A National Education Longitudinal Study shows high-scoring rich students as 74\% more likely to graduate from college compared to low-scoring poor students.\textsuperscript{24} That statistic is intuitive if it is based solely on those students’ test scores, except that the same study also indicates that high-scoring poor students were at a slight disadvantage when compared to low-scoring rich kids, with a 29\% chance of obtaining a college degree compared to 30\% for the latter group.\textsuperscript{25} That trend is contrary to what occurred in Putnam’s description of Port Clinton in the 1950s, where wealth did not play a role in determining whether or not one would complete higher education. As mentioned earlier, it is understood that not all vocations and careers pay equally, but how do we rationalize access to education being based on financial wealth? Of course there are situations where friends and acquaintances can help studious as well as less motivated children attend certain schools and graduate from college; such was the case, for instance, for Don’s pastor from Port Clinton who helped the youngster obtain financial aid. There are also cases of children who, through many struggles and setbacks, push forward to become the first in their family to obtain a college degree. Nevertheless, that is not the kind of help I am referring to, because nowadays, wealth and status are playing a more significant role.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 189-190.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
In general in deciding who has access to education, the phenomenon being the norm rather than the exception.

In addition to wealth and social status, race, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexual orientation continue to negatively impact access to opportunity in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, the problem that we face in contemporary America is that, given that where you start in life more often than not determines where you end up, most of us, even before those historical prejudices come into play, through our own devices have consciously or unconsciously sabotaged many of our cohabitants’ chances of actually getting a start in life, much less a fair one. By equating success and happiness to wealth, keeping said wealth concentrated among one percent of the population, and by linking access to essential well-being components to affluence, we are essentially violating the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence. Our violation lies in the fact that we, as a whole, are not ensuring that fundamental conditions for life and liberty are in place in order for each individual to pursue happiness. At this point, a different look at Tocqueville’s characterization of American self-interest through cooperation is necessary to question how we, as a nation, have been characterizing our sense of obligation.

REVISITING SELF-INTEREST PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD

Earlier in Chapter 1, I elaborated on Tocqueville’s striking observation of “self-interest properly understood” in early American democratic society, the notion being
embodied in each citizen’s motivation to respect and uphold others’ rights, thereby safeguarding their own. According to the French historian, it gave Americans pleasure “to point out how an enlightened self-love continually leads them to help one another and dispose them freely to give part of their time and wealth for the good of the state.”

Today that statement is for most of us synonymous to paying our taxes and taking the time to vote, with maybe a few tax-deductible donations here and there. Values of honesty, trust and reciprocity, have become the exception rather than the standard. Already back in 1998, a survey showed that the percentage of Americans who believed that people in general led good, honest and moral lives had decrease from 50% in 1952 to under 30%. In fact, one could wonder if those virtues were truly prevalent at any time in our history. Indeed, to discern dishonesty and selfishness, we need only to consider that first, we took over an already inhabited land and called it ours, and second, we maintained slavery which heavily contributed to the nation’s wealth while simultaneously depriving the enslaved of human dignity. Considering those facts, we can understand that Tocqueville’s “self-interest properly understood”, even back when he observed it, was not about being benevolent for the sake of benevolence as much as it was about protecting the state. The proof is in the end of the historian’s quote from above “…for the good of the state.” Therefore, “self-interest properly understood” relates more to seeing others as a means to an end, within reason, said end being the preservation of the state’s overall well-being. Today, reason appears to be giving way to excess and self-absorption,

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26 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 526.

where some find ways to justify what reason undoubtedly would reject. An example illustrating such lack of understanding was the significant amount of protest a previous presidency met when it proposed setting minimum and maximum income as a mechanism to reduce wealth inequality and provide better living conditions and opportunities for everyone. Indeed, the authors of *Contemporary America* recount several people condemning such a proposal as satanic and selfish. Such comments are troublesome because they align with the exaggerated individualism and self-absorbed behaviors that Tocqueville cautions as leading to despotism.

The United States’ fundamental credo of self-reliance definitely strengthens an already human inclination for self-preservation, as do our materialistic views of success and capitalist market system. Already in the 19th century, European scholars and politicians, including Alexis de Tocqueville, who had once admired our country’s great democratic spirit and drive for success, were changing their opinions based on how our developments and success were shaping individual and national behaviors. For example, several visiting French writers in the 1820s and 1830s remarked American society’s inclination to make money only to turn around and use it to make more money, and referred to that disposition as the “coarse spirit that gives the people the illusion of being happy because they enjoy security and tranquility.”

28 Duncan and Goddard, *Contemporary America*, 137.

29 Ibid.

American practice of self-interest rightly understood was replaced with growing skepticism regarding the excesses of democracy, corruption in political institutions and mores, the lack of leadership and slavery. The historian further worried that the invasive infringement of economic matters on politics would destroy democracy if individual interests were not kept under control, and moderation practiced.\textsuperscript{31} In correspondence with his American friends in the 1850s, Tocqueville offered some early insight into possible causes for our current state of affairs. For instance, he deemed that the same sense of adventure and quest for opportunity that gave rise to our nation, rather than increasing our humanity once wealth was achieved, had the opposite effect of turning us into an insatiable, materialistic society. He attributed society’s excesses at the time partly to America’s free-market and capitalist system which, he explained, could be difficult to moderate because by its very nature, capitalism focuses on individual wealth and ownership. Tocqueville also believed that our nation was too young and immature a democracy to handle all of its rapid success and achievements, especially given democracy’s tendency to foster individualism.\textsuperscript{32} Hence, already in early American society, our rights and freedom were tied to and conducive to individual wealth creation and accumulation, which explains why slavery, as a means of wealth generation, took so long to be abolished. Thus the opportunity and income gaps which are so out of control today were bound to occur, first because from its outset our democratic nation was prone to excesses, and second because our idea of success has historically focused on, and

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 398-400.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 401.
continues to emphasize the need to be wealthy. We incessantly indulge in those excesses, especially because they helped the country position itself as a world leader, which for us is the good of the state. What is happening in modern day America is therefore an accumulation of historical practices that we continue today, as we work toward an accomplished life by our American standards.

When we parallel rights and freedom to the American ideal of success, and when we contemplate the described inequalities, we have to ask the question: what exactly does having rights and being free in America mean today? Most of us would probably agree that it means having protection from abuses and crime, a sense of security, liberty of expression and of association, in other words, all the amendments in the Bill of Rights. However, I have just demonstrated that many among us are in fact being deprived of any sense of security, of a voice to express themselves, of a chance to simply exist. And it is all happening within the realm of the legal and justice system. Concurrently, those of us who have a sense of security and a voice tend to give up that voice; we give up our freedom of thought and our ability to challenge prevalent norms and even injustices, and we willingly to do so in order to preserve our comfort. One could argue that it is human nature to want to be comfortable, but I am inclined to say that it is more a trait of our nature in the U.S. and perhaps even in the Western world to believe that our personal comfort is the primary purpose or end goal of our lives. This conclusion is based on the fact that most of us believe that all people in this country and throughout the world are born free and equal, and that we Americans accept that we all should have access to education and an opportunity to lead a good life. It is only natural and logical therefore,
that by virtue of our belief system, we should do all we can to concretize those convictions. Nonetheless, doing so requires that we step out of our comfort zone so that we can realize our own limitations when it comes to how we perceived others independently as well as in relation to us. It also necessitates that we acknowledge our biases, prejudices and be aware of how our actions and indifference affect others. When we take on such exercise, we find that indeed we must reassess our current notions of rights and freedom.

The following chapter explores the idea of freedom through the 19th and 20th centuries’ philosophical movement known as Existentialism, delving into the work of one of the prominent figures of that school of thought, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Later on, the chapter offers a complementary view of freedom that Sartre’s compatriot, Simone Weil advances, and it also examines her opinion on the matter of rights, what they are and are not. But first, a brief summary of the basic characteristics of Existentialism is in order.
AN EXISTENTIALIST PERSPECTIVE

Although the suffix “ism” suggests a unified, definite system of thought, existentialism is primarily a philosophical enquiry into human existence that focuses on the human subject in being. French Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel was the first to use the term “existentialism” in 1943. However, much of the substance of the movement, namely what it means to be human, was emphasized in the work of many 19th century philosophers such as Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, the last one being regarded as the father of existentialism. Indeed, building on 17th century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal’s expression of man as contemplating himself in isolation and being terrified by the experience, Kierkegaard developed a philosophy accentuating the passions intrinsic to man’s existence.¹ Existentialists differed in some of their views; some such as Marcel and Paul Tillich were Christians, while others such as Jean-Paul Sartre were atheists; some embraced the label existentialist while others like Albert Camus, rejected being identified as such. Nevertheless, despite their differences, those philosophers agreed on fundamental tenets of existentialism which philosophy professor

and author, Kevin Aho succinctly summarizes in his book *Existentialism: An Introduction* as follows.²

**Existence precedes Essence:** This popular expression means that man literally exists, that he is thrown into the world before his existence has or can have meaning, and he must define that meaning or essence for himself.

**The Self as a Tension:** This principle refers to the constant struggle that occurs within us to exist within our human limitations, or facticity, e.g. physical, physiological, social, historical conditions, while concurrently trying to transcend those limitations in order to process, feel and interpret them in a manner that is uniquely ours, thereby forging our individual identities.

**The Insider’s Perspective:** This indicates the necessity to accept that our existence and experience are subjective and therefore, they can only be explained within the conditions of our own narrative, because existence always takes place within a social and emotional context that shapes our orientation and perceptions.

**The Need for Moods:** In order to understand our individual “self” by interpreting our experiences, which as just mentioned, always possess an emotional dimension, we have to welcome and acknowledge the different feelings we have about those experiences. This requires that we first understand that reason and logic have their limit in explaining the human condition, and second that we allow ourselves to live through

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moods such as anxiety, guilt, absurdity, fear of death and nausea, which are powerful tools in propelling us outside our complacent and self-deceptive states in order to reveal or remind us of our free and yet finite condition. Such moods incite us to live fully and meaningfully.

The Possibility for Authenticity: Being true to oneself is a dominant theme in existentialism, and many philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Camus were strong proponents of non-conformism to public norms and expectations for the greater goal of finding and remaining oneself.

Freedom as Anguish: Also essential to the existentialist is the idea that man is inherently free and responsible for developing his essence as he exists, through his actions, feeling and choices. However, when man realizes that by choosing for himself, he also chooses for all people, the weight of this responsibility brings about angst.

Responsibility: As stated above, with our freedom comes the responsibility of our choices for ourselves as well as for others, along with the consequences of those choices.

Among all the above principles, freedom is at the heart of existentialism. It is the root which everything else builds upon because for existentialists, within the inevitable boundaries of human existence, man is free to acknowledge himself, choose for himself, feel and interpret emotions, and give his life meaning.

From the brief description offered above we note a certain similarity between how existentialists conceive man’s life and how we, in the United States and the Western
world, understand man as being in control of his life and happiness. Nevertheless, from that similarity we should not conclude that our view of freedom is congruent with existentialists’ positions, because the existentialist conception of freedom differs from popular views in a few distinctive ways. First, existentialism rejects the psychological idea that freedom stems from an inner faculty or will that we consciously enact. Rather, the philosophical movement contends that many of our choices are results of learned behaviors or habits developed throughout our lives.\(^3\) Second, existentialists do not believe that there is a moral absolute that can justify our choices, therefore they do not adhere to our traditional view of freedom as a value that can be increased or decreased and must be protected. Instead, freedom in existentialism is a basic component of the universal human condition and can therefore only be embraced.\(^4\) Lastly, freedom for existentialists is not a measure of our ability to obtain whatever we want, a belief that is prevalent in our culture. On the contrary, in existentialism, always getting what we want threatens freedom because it turns us into prisoners of our desires, with impulses guiding our choices and actions. In our society, the insatiable desire to accrue more wealth, and the proneness to excessive behavior that we at times exhibit are examples of this form of freedom that existentialists caution against. Furthermore, always obtaining what we desire prevents us from experiencing those moods of anguish, absurdity and guilt that are so important to be able to reflect on the human condition and affect it.

\(^{3}\) Aho, *Existentialism: An Introduction*, 64.  
\(^{4}\) Ibid., 66.
One could argue that going after what one wants is the only means by which one can show that one takes responsibility for and affirms himself. However, the question is not a matter of pursuing what we want, it is first the object or motivation behind the want, and more importantly, the conviction that we ought to always get what we want. If we give a moment to introspection, we can ask ourselves questions including: why do I want what I want? Is it needed and how does it contribute to my life and the world around me? We may find that the answers to those questions are based on other people’s expectations and standards of what is meaningful. Being engrossed in society’s opinions can prevent awareness of our facticity and consequently inhibit our ability to transcend our human limitations to achieve authenticity. Such a disposition, in which tension with the self is non-existent, drives a person to want more, as impulsive desires motivated by our surroundings take control of us. For an existentialist, that is not freedom, rather it is conformism and a lack or loss of self-identity.

The following section turns attention to French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre and discusses his rhetoric on the notion of man as being free. I selected Sartre’s work not so much because he was a key figure of existentialism, but mostly due to his definition of freedom, which goes hand in hand with our principle of self-reliance and autonomy, but yet goes beyond self-responsibility and makes the free man also accountable for the whole of humanity.
FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY ACCORDING TO SARTRE

For Sartre, man is absolutely free and totally responsible for the meaning of his existence because “is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”\(^5\) This is because, as mentioned earlier, man’s existence precedes his essence, and as the philosopher explains, each person’s existence stems from nothing. This is so regardless whether one is a believer in God or an atheist, as when one is born, he or she simply is, devoid of pre-conceived notions. This nothingness means that freedom is a universal condition in every person’s coming into existence, giving man complete latitude to define himself. Seen in this basic sense, it follows that responsibility is a natural consequence of being free. Indeed, each person bears the weight of his life, but more importantly, by being responsible for his life, man is also responsible for the world because whatever happens to each of us and to others is a manifestation of human conditions.

Human conditions frame and permeate existence as a tension because they concurrently depend on others and on the self. Living in a society necessarily entails others’ involvement. This is very apparent in the notion of rights, for example, because when we exercise our rights, we always do so vis-à-vis others. We express our thoughts and opinions to others, assemble and coalesce with others, financially exchange with others; in short we depend on people to enjoy and maintain the way of life we adhere to. The need for otherness is all the more obvious when we contemplate the fact that no matter how much we try to separate our individuality from the collective, we cannot, for

we feel and experience living only through, with and for other people. Our relationships with others are thus very important to our own personhood, and they affect our freedom of choice and action. Therefore, through the other lies self-discovery.

The Sartrean account tells us that existence requires facing otherness, which provides us with infinite opportunities to be free, because it allows us to be aware first of the otherness, second of the self in the face of said otherness, and lastly, it enables us to consider possibilities or alternatives. In other words, it is in the ability to conceive a different state of affairs that we can come to truly appreciate the current and actual state of things, an exercise through which, for the French philosopher, man can “realize a nihilating rupture with the world and with himself…that the permanent possibility of this rupture is the same as freedom.” According to Sartre, freedom necessitates distance or isolation from the daily routine as well as from more extraneous circumstances in order to honestly reflect on how we feel and process our being in given conditions at a specific time. As a result, we are able to critically think and decide about what to do, subsequently acting on motives derived from our thought process. There are, nevertheless, aspects in society that can be obstacles to our ability as individuals to achieve the type of freedom Sartre describes. For one, not everyone is able to take distance from our society’s brouhaha, and much less from oneself. As a matter of fact, our saturated culture often seems to convey that living up to social norms and demands are the only means of

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7 Ibid., 415.
realizing the authentic self. At any moment, there is a book, a smartphone application, a website, a drug, a treatment or other mechanism being advertised as the answer to our success and happiness. Of themselves, those tools are not necessarily bad or useless, nonetheless, when we rely solely on them and forget that we are the ones to control our lives, we jump on the band-wagon without having first taken the care to honestly and dispassionately evaluate ourselves. Consequently, those solutions fall short in achieving their purpose and leave us dissatisfied. This inability to isolate oneself results in us turning into programmed individuals, incapable of seeing other alternatives because we cannot introspectively and critically assess actual conditions.

On the other hand, there is the case of one who goes through the mental process of assessing the world around him and interpreting himself in that world, deduces different possibilities, but ultimately chooses to relinquish his ability to choose, preferring to maintain a comfortable routine or to adhere to social norms to satisfy a sense of belonging. Such behavior for Sartre is an example of bad faith, which is a central concept for the French thinker. In Sartrean philosophy, bad faith is the opposite of authenticity; it is the refusal to recognize facticity and transcendence for what they are, and also the refusal to synthesize them. In that regard, Sartre claims that all faith is bad faith, because even sincere thoughts and actions can prevent one from transcending one’s facticity, and in sincerity we can also limit others to their factual conditions, thereby,

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8 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 547.
denying them the freedom of their individuality.9 A simple example of sincerity as bad faith is when we see beggars or famous actors and confine them to their social, cultural and perceived financial conditions. For while we are sincerely acknowledging what they do, i.e. beg or act, we at times do not see them beyond those factual circumstances as individuals capable of achieving and deserving their personal authenticity. Conversely, bad faith is also expressed in the denial of our facticity. For instance, when I ignore the beggars but convince myself that such behavior is other than my own and that I am in fact a giving person, I am practicing bad faith. As discussed earlier, the self in existentialism evolves in constant tension between human conditions and the desire to surpass those conditions. It is this tension or ambiguity that renders bad faith possible, making it a powerful instrument to process existence, as it enables us to escape the process of acknowledging our facticity and going beyond it to be accountable for our identity.10 Transcending our facticity exposes us to our freedom and the burden of this freedom to define ourselves. Said burden, as mentioned previously, creates the unpleasant feeling of anguish. To avoid that anguish, it is convenient for us to turn to bad faith in order to deny facticity or transcendence, and consequently reject the responsibility that comes with being free.11

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The responsibility in freedom empowers one to understand that he or she has control over the act of wishing itself, and for Sartre, freedom, rather than being subject to our caprices, transcends materiality because being free “does not mean to obtain what one has wished but rather by oneself to determine oneself to wish.”\textsuperscript{12} In our society, we take pride in asserting that we are free and that we have rights to think and choose for ourselves, however, our historical narrative is such that we mistake freedom to obtain with the liberty of choice. Indeed, in our culture, the best manifestation of freedom is through signs of success and the achievement of certain milestones. However as explained earlier, always succumbing to our caprices and having them met is to become slaves to a system which ultimately chooses for us, and once choice is gone, so is freedom.

Freedom makes man responsible for himself, and Sartre emphasizes that man being responsible for himself, not only means that he is “responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.”\textsuperscript{13} In *Being and Nothingness*, the philosopher repeats that statement remarking that “man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for himself and for the whole world as a way of being.”\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, our choices and actions not only impact us, but also affect humanity. If we take the time to assimilate the gravity of this statement, and the accompanying anguish, we cannot help but question our behaviors and

\textsuperscript{12} Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 459.

\textsuperscript{13} Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 16.

\textsuperscript{14} Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 529.
attitudes. We are also compelled to re-examine our general understanding of self-reliance and the manner in which we perceive rights and freedom as being self-serving, and to perhaps envisage a humbler approach to what it means to be free. A few concerns, however, need to be addressed with respect to Sartre’s conception of freedom.

A prevalent argument against Sartrean freedom is that our human factual nature is such that we do not always have a choice, because we grow so used to being a certain way, we simply cannot think, much less choose differently. Sartre’s compatriot and fellow existentialist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents this critique from a philosophical perspective by proposing that if we are indeed absolutely free in regard to a situation, regardless of the past, freedom would not commit itself to any project because it would always find itself indeterminate.\(^\text{15}\) Sartre addresses the argument by first pointing that when we are immersed in a task, we have the natural inclination to complete that task.\(^\text{16}\) He also explains that each person’s undertaking is motivated by an original project, i.e. that our motives shape our behavior.\(^\text{17}\) Merleau-Ponty however, argues that in the quest to achieve balance with our environment, our physical bodies have certain intentions that are developed out of habit and that we do not choose, but may resist.\(^\text{18}\) Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, those habitual behaviors are tools we can have recourse to for dealing with various


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 119.

\(^{17}\) Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 451-452.

situations, especially if proven successful previously. Those repetitive behaviors also help us adjust to our environment. Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, from past behaviors or habits, we sustain intentions that we are unaware of, which impact the act of being-for-itself, and therefore, also affect our freedom and choices over time.

Another critique of Sartre’s claim that freedom is absolute comes from practical life. If we consider, for instance, a person who is suffering mentally and/or physically, it is hard to believe that that person has the freedom to choose among projects, because in the face of their suffering, the only option is to diminish or stop the pain; it is a project that is imposed on that person, it is not chosen. It is true, that at times, we find ourselves in situations where a choice, let alone a right choice seems impossible; however, while the choice one makes is based on one’s environment and the choice’s projected outcome, the ability itself to choose is still there, independent of considerations for the past or future. Therefore, there always exists a choice that we make, even if that choice is to forego choosing. If we recall, Merleau-Ponty also agrees that man may choose to resist certain predispositions. Thus, a man in chains can choose to train his mind into thinking a certain way and act according to the adopted thought process, just as a man at liberty to roam about can. Similarly, the suffering person chooses how to end the pain, by complying, attempting to escape, fight back or committing suicide. In other words, under ideal or lamentable circumstances, man is free to define himself, to choose his identity vis-a-vis those circumstances. In his essay, The Republic of Silence, Sartre underlines that

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point by distinguishing freedom as a responsibility for one’s identity from the lack or absence of liberty of choice under oppression. Indeed, the author proclaims that never were the French freer than under the Nazi occupation, which deprived them of their rights and subjected them to exile, captivity and imminent death. For Sartre, freedom existed under those hostile and perilous conditions because each person was forced to face the facticity of those conditions, which in turn forced the oppressed individual to seek and define himself through authentic choices, i.e. to transcend his reality in order to be himself. Freedom is thus absolute because under all circumstances, man is free to choose his identity.

From the existentialist and Sartrean conception of freedom and that conception’s critics, it appears that the problem does not rest in the act or ability to choose, but rather in the quality of the choice. In that regard, I support Sartre’s position that man is indeed free to choose who he is in a given situation within the boundaries of human reality or facticity. Nevertheless, those conditions do impact the quality of his choices whether he is aware or unaware of them. This chapter has so far shown the emphasis that existentialism places on man’s freedom as his responsibility for himself and all others. Therefore, if our conditions impact our choices, they also impact others’ choices, and given that our choices are inherently part of human conditions, they then necessarily impact the kind of choices others make.

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The next section discusses the conditions under which we, individually and as the whole of mankind, can improve the quality of our choices. To that end, I consult the work of another French philosopher, Simone Weil who, starting with the conviction that man is sacred, distinguishes the notion of rights from that of obligations, and maintains that it is in meeting a set of obligations, that each and all can achieve authentic freedom.

SIMONE WEIL: OBLIGATIONS AND THE HUMAN SOUL’S NEEDS

Weil’s conception of freedom aligns with that of Sartre and other existentialists in that it is not a relationship between desires and their satisfaction, but rather one between a person’s thoughts and actions. Indeed, the political activist considers that an “absolutely free man would be he whose every action proceeded from a preliminary judgement concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end.” Weil also realizes that freedom or liberty can never be perfectly attained because of constraints posed by human conditions and nature, a point Sartre also makes. However, she goes beyond the Sartrean conception of freedom by explicitly tying it to the notion of absolute obligations. In that respect, Weil not only agrees with Sartre that the free individual is responsible for himself and all others, but she additionally claims that human freedom is the capacity to reach a transcendent good only through the


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 80.
fulfillment of absolute and universal obligations.\textsuperscript{24} She sees freedom as the connection between the two realms in which we evolve, namely the realm of the soul and the realm of the body.\textsuperscript{25} Let us examine each of those components.

The realm of the soul, which takes place beyond time and space, is necessary to access Weil’s transcendent good, because at that level we are able to identify and embrace what is impersonal in all people and makes them sacred. Indeed, Weil asserts that in each human being there exists something sacred, however, it is not his or her person, but simply the human being, precisely because he or she is a human being.\textsuperscript{26} Put differently, what makes each individual sacred is not his personality or physical appearance, it is something that transcends the individual and belongs to everyone, and is therefore impersonal.\textsuperscript{27} We can thus see that for Weil, there is a relationship between the good and the sacred, and that is that the good is at the heart of what is sacred, it is its source. The philosopher cites love and beauty as examples of sacred and impersonal objects, because they categorically exist above and outside of any single person.\textsuperscript{28} She further explains that to reach the realm of the soul and thus of impersonality, one has to isolate oneself and achieve a form of mental solitude that is free of collective


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 67-68.


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 54-55.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 55.
influences, an observation that is reminiscent of existentialism’s transcendence to individual authenticity.

In the realm of the soul, in order to respect what is impersonal and universal, there also exists the notion of obligation which is binding only on human beings, identical for all, and is to be fulfilled towards each, precisely because he or she is a human being, regardless of human reality and circumstances at any point in time. At the level of the soul, man’s aspiration to the transcendent good as his destiny can only be fulfilled by meeting those obligations which also exist within that same realm of the soul, and this is why obligations pertain to freedom, which is that state where man transcends his reality to arrive at authenticity. Those obligations are absolute and universal because human conscience consents to it. Indeed, we agree universally that human life is to be protected, sheltered from affliction, and that human suffering, where present, should be alleviated and stopped.

For Weil, obligations are to be clearly distinguished from the notion of rights, because, unlike obligations which operate at the level of the impersonal, rights exist and are interpreted within the realm of the personal and liberty of choice, therefore, they are subject to conditions. They are secondary to obligations, and in fact, they can only be effectively exercised in relation to corresponding obligations. For example, Tocqueville’s

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29 Ibid., 56.
30 Ibid., 87.
31 Ibid., 64.
concept of “self-interest properly understood”, in which like-minded members of a community assist and cooperate with one another, is of a personal nature because it seeks to safeguard one’s own interests by enforcing a set of specific rules for a determined group of people, outside of which there are no concerns for slaves, who are not viewed as human beings, but whom our human conscience dictates we are obligated to see as sacred. The French author also remarks that when one possesses a right, one can make good or bad use of it, therefore, rights in themselves are not necessarily good.\textsuperscript{32} Back in colonial times, slave owners had the right to own land and slaves, while slaves themselves had no rights. When Miranda rights are read to the arrested, they are told that they have the right to remain silent because anything they say can and will be used against them in a court of law. Such a right is a warning that does not necessarily aim to serve the common good, because the arrested can choose to withhold the truth or important information in order to avoid further trouble. Our general understanding of rights is such that we conclude that, although each person is entitled to liberty, work and the pursuit of happiness, there is no guarantee he or she will achieve any of those things.

Obligations, on the other hand, make each and all people responsible for ensuring that needs essential to be able to pursue happiness are met for all of mankind. They are therefore, impersonal and are always good to fulfill.\textsuperscript{33} They also exist independent of any type or number of conditions, and are therefore, superior to rights which, as I have

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
explained, always relate to conditions. Viewed from that angle, we can better understand why there can be different rights, interpreted differently, depending on the place and time. Obligations or duties towards one another, however, are and remain the same, regardless of time and space. If rights permeate the material realm and are not suited for the realm of the soul, how can we within our human reality proceed to fulfill duties our obligations that Weil asserts belong to a world beyond our facticity?

For Simone Weil, once we are able to access and understand what is sacred in humanity, it becomes apparent that to respect the sacred, we have to fulfill obligations. However because our lives also take place within the realm of the body and the material, the fulfillment of those obligation can only be verified by meeting imperative earthly needs. Human and natural constraints notwithstanding, the philosopher asserts that there is a limited set of human needs, that if met, move us closer to the ideal and authentic form of freedom at both the individual and the collective levels. Those needs she refers to as the needs of the soul, and next, I present and examine how our society fares in meeting them.

Order: Refers to social relationships that people maintained such that all obligations are compatible with one another, and none gets violated for the sake of meeting another.

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Weil’s description of order within a society, while straightforward, is problematic because we continue to evolve within political and socioeconomic spheres that operate on concepts of winner takes all, and sacrifice this in order to satisfy that. A simple case of incompatible obligations is, for example, each person’s right to earn a living and a company’s right to maximize its profits by outsourcing work to cheaper sources of labor overseas. All of us would agree that the reality of our society is such that it is quasi impossible, or that it is business suicide, not to take advantage of lower labor costs to increase revenues and profits. Weil, however, would probably disagree with us. First, the philosopher would not consider maximizing profits for a company as an imperative need, and certainly not a need of any shareholder’s soul. Rather such a goal is a desire. In contrast, she would argue that a person’s right to work is an essential need for that person, in order to eat, have shelter and a sense of purpose, and that in being aware of that need, that company’s obligation would be to fulfill it. A thought process along the lines of what Weil considers order could perhaps lead businesses to develop courses of action that satisfy both employer and employee, at least to a certain extent. However, in the absence of a happy compromise, a worker’s need for order should trump a company’s desire to maximize profits, and that company should be obligated to provide the worker with employment that provides sufficient income and benefits to sustain a decent living. Only after that obligation is met should the employer turn attention to satisfying desires of increasing profits.

Liberty: Is the ability to choose in a society where there are rules that define and limit people’s choices. For Weil, rules that are sensible, straightforward and easily
understood in terms of their purpose and necessity, such that people see the good and
moral in them, are required in order to have a free conscience that can freely choose even
within confined choices. 36

When we consider the evidence presented in Chapter 2 about the significant
income and opportunity gaps that are present in our society, one cannot help but question
the role that our conscience plays in our choices and actions. Specifically, if we link
morality to the rights and laws that embody those rules Weil speaks of, we may argue
that if we are not breaking any law, we are not infringing on anyone’s rights, and
consequently, we are not morally wrong. However, when we discuss the notion of rights
from her perspective, for Weil, respecting a rule does not equate to being morally right if
said rule stems from bad faith and constricts one’s ability to have a free conscience.
Remember indeed that for the philosopher, rights come into play with personal motives
or interests that often infringe on human beings’ impersonal dignity. The imperative for
true morality and good conscience is in meeting obligations of respecting human life,
even if those obligations are not strictly or clearly required by law and social roles. If, as
conscientious citizens, we reshape our society to develop rules and laws focused on
recognizing and fulfilling all people’s impersonal needs, true liberty in free conscience
can prevail.

**Obedience:** Is the consent to a rule, or conceding to an authority that one judges as
legitimate. According to Weil, leaders should be the first accountable for recognizing that
obedience should be based on consent, and never on fear for punishment or hope of a

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36 Ibid., 12-13.
reward.\textsuperscript{37} She also observes that obedience applies to all in a society, and she states that “any body politic governed by a sovereign ruler accountable to nobody is in the hands of a sick man.”\textsuperscript{38}

As a society, we are famous for practicing what is known as American exceptionalism, which occurs when as a nation we exempt ourselves from complying with rules or certain aspects of rules that we promote for others, often times with the justification that complying with those rules is not in the best interest of the American people.\textsuperscript{39} We also lack obedience and show exceptionalism because we have double standards, meaning that we judge ourselves according to a set of principles different from those we apply to other nations, and we also judge our allies based on rules that diverge from those we use for countries we consider our enemies.\textsuperscript{40} Lastly, we practice exceptionalism in our legal system when we refuse to refer to foreign human rights to assist in making domestic legal decisions.\textsuperscript{41}

For those who have or are tempted to argue that exceptionalism does not exist or that it is only natural that we deviate or refuse to ratify a rule that our leaders consider harmful to our nation, thereby denying that our behavior shows disobedience, we give the

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 11.
example of our president, who is reported to have asked lawyers back in 2017 about his power to pardon himself and his children in regard to a federal investigation.\textsuperscript{42} When the head of a country preemptively seeks to pardon himself, it is a clear example of a person, who believes he is accountable to no one, and as Weil warns, such person may not be suitable to properly rule said country. Such a behavior also constitutes an act of bad faith, and only encourages similar behavior from the citizenry, thereby blurring the lines of accountability and submission. For, if we ignore or eradicate our sense of accountability to ourselves, it is much harder to be accountable to others. Our exceptionalist attitude exemplifies, once again, the personal nature of rights, that rather than seeking to protect all, prioritize personal or national interests. Under such conditions, obedience is not a result of consenting human conscience, but of fearful or greedy souls.

**Responsibility:** Refers to people’s need to feel that they are useful contributors to a project outside of their own projects, but in which they have an interest, and towards which they often take decisions.\textsuperscript{43} For that need to be met, individuals have be made aware of the range of activities the social entities they belong to encompass, and they have to appreciate those activities’ values, and the role they, as individuals, play within that range.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{43} Weil, The Need for Roots, 15.

\textsuperscript{44} Miles, Simone Weil: An Anthology, 97-98.
With a current unemployment rate of 4.1% as of December, 2017, we seem to collectively be doing well with respect to contributing economically to society.\textsuperscript{45} Besides the labor force, many people find a sense of purpose in being stay-at-home parents or in volunteering with different kinds of organizations. Nevertheless, if we consider our faults as a society in addressing needs of order, obedience and liberty as described above, we come to question the nature of the values in the work we partake in. Many of us feel useful at our job, whatever it may be, but Weil would probably argue that if the efforts we provide sustain or turn a blind eye to others’ unfair treatment or suffering, then those efforts are in fact useless. Let us refer back to the example of the company wishing to outsource some manpower. If I am an employee of that company, and my work involves securing the outsourcing firm that will cause current employees to be laid off, although I am fulfilling my work duties, I simply cannot in good conscience say that I feel useful doing so. Yes, in completing my task, I may get rewarded in some way, and certainly I am facilitating the creation of work for others; however, all that is at the detriment of another group of people. At the same time, if I refuse to obey, I may lose my job and my employer will find someone else to do the work. Again, in such difficult situations, human obligations supersede financial goals, and prioritizing the fulfilment of human needs can motivate employers and employees to envisage win-win options that ultimately make all feel useful because human dignity was valued over money.


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Equality and Hierarchy: Simone Weil sees equality in a society as the public recognition that the same amount of respect and attention is due to each human being, and is actively expressed through institutions and mores.\(^{46}\) Hierarchy refers to the range of duties distributed in a community.\(^{47}\) Weil acknowledges that differences among men, which result in certain inequalities, are part of the human condition. She, nevertheless, believes that the combination of equality and inequality should achieve equality of opportunity, so that children, through education for instance, have equal prospects.\(^{48}\)

Chapter 2 illustrates our shortcomings in meeting needs of equality and hierarchy. Indeed, with statistics showing that education is associated with social status and revealing an enduring opportunity gap, we seem a long way from Weil’s account of equality. As discussed in the first chapter, our mores have historically favored personal or interest driven respect towards others, and with time, certain groups of people have seen an increase or decrease in the respect they received based on specific socioeconomic circumstances that drove others to value what is personal in them as a means to secure their own wellbeing. Such is the case for the opportunity gap, which we condemn as a society, but in fact tolerate when our institutions pay less attention to certain groups of people or issues because they do not impact us directly, and we begin to acknowledge them only if a threat to our personal comfort is eminent.

\(^{46}\) Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 16.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 16-17.
Truth and Freedom of Opinion: For Weil, this is the most sacred need of the human soul. It requires that intellectual culture be within each person’s reach, free of any form of propaganda or pressures that seek to deviate or mask the truth.\textsuperscript{49} To that end, the philosopher proposes that dishonesty be punishable by law through courts of judges who not only receive “a legal education, but above all a spiritual one, and only secondarily an intellectual one. They must become accustomed to love truth.”\textsuperscript{50}

While we certainly have a court system we believe in, concerns such as American exceptionalism, and social issues such as racial, gender and religious discrimination show that dishonesty endures in our society. Thankfully, there exist organizations of individuals who, through their activism, help reveal the truth. Those organizations embody freedom of association, at the heart of which lies freedom of opinion.

Freedom of opinion is necessary to foster a truth-centered society, because it is how human intelligence, and hence, the truth, are manifested. Although organizations are a form of freedom of expression, Weil distinguishes between the two, stating that freedom of expression, as a need for intelligence is an individual enterprise, not a collective one.\textsuperscript{51} In fact, the philosopher believes that, to preserve each person’s freedom

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 36-39.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 26-27.
of thought, groups should not be allowed to express an opinion, as to avoid imposing it on its members.⁵²

Weil’s position on freedom of expression presents conflicting aspects. On the one hand, one can appreciate the benefits of a society free of political party fanaticism in which people adopt any idea, often out of blind trust and loyalty, without having properly investigated the merit and consequences of that idea. Indeed, in the past few years, we have become so polarized in our politics, that many feel our democracy at risk of deteriorating.⁵³ We seem to operate in silos that we assimilate to, unable to notice, listen, and much less imagine modes of thought outside our own. On the other hand, we have come so far as a nation because of groups creating awareness and inciting action, that it is impossible to imagine our country progressing or correcting any wrongdoing without the collective voice. Groups of activists and the press are examples of associations that have made facts available to us, and serve as conduits to demand and achieve reform in legislature. Conversely, with advances in information technology, the threat of being misinformed is omnipresent, which makes it all the more important to step away from collectivities’ influences to assess situations and information individually. To achieve balance between the collective and the individual spheres of opinions, the guiding factor should ultimately be the motives behind the expression of opinions. If it is to seek and reveal truth and unmask dishonesty and insults to human dignity, then, voicing a thought

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⁵² Ibid.

as a group is acceptable, even necessary. Otherwise, as Weil explains, one ought to take
cautions not be influenced by a collective opinion, without having critically evaluated its
legitimacy.

**Honor and Punishment:** The soul has a need for social surroundings that allow
each person to take part in a noble tradition that is publicly acknowledged. Punishment
is a necessary means of reintegrating a person who commits a crime into what is truly
good, provided he or she consents to it.

Honor and punishment are beneficial to an equilibrated society where people have
equal opportunities. However, this paper has shown that such is not the case in the United
States today. For, as things currently stand, many who are at a socioeconomic
disadvantage feel oppressed, and they are not concerned with taking part in any noble
tradition, as they cannot even access proper education. Those needs, as Simone Weil
conceives them, are therefore only achievable in an environment where the preceding
needs are first met.

**Security and Risk:** People in a community, except for brief and circumstantial
moments, should have a life secured from fear and terror. They should also have some
sense of risk to prevent boredom and to stimulate courage.

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55 Ibid., 20.
56 Ibid., 32-33.
One only needs to visit any news network communication outlet to get apprised of the current state of fear that looms over our nation. On any given day, our population expresses fear of unemployment, of police brutality, of discrimination, of being duped by a political party or another entity, of losing all privacy, of terrorism, etc. All of those concerns are legitimate fears that continue to materialize, and although it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the motives and actions taken to counter and dissipate them, it is important that we acknowledge that fear persists in our society, and it can impact along with other needs the risks people are willing to take. While too much security can be suffocating and infringe on individuality and privacy, the lack thereof can destabilize communities. For example, at a time where correct and incorrect information travels fast, knowing that one can be monitored virtually everywhere can cause people to hold back on taking the risk of whistle blowing for instance, in apprehension of losing anonymity, even when human conscience calls for it. In that case, security results in causing fear rather than a true sense of safety. Second, the inadequate handling of Weil’s obligations of obedience, liberty, order and responsibility promotes mistrust that in turn fosters fear of institutions such as the government, and the police when they abuse their authority.

Private and Collective Property: Weil sees private ownership as an important need for the soul because of all people’s natural inclination to want to own whatever they have used for a long period time, for work, pleasure, or out of necessity.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, collective

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 34.
property is needed so that in a society where civic life flourishes, all people can find pleasure in sharing what is public, i.e. monuments, parks, gardens, etc.\textsuperscript{58}

Similar to the need for honor, the soul’s need for private and collective property can be met only if others, such as needs of liberty, order, responsibility and security are fulfilled. Indeed, if a person is oppressed or does not feel valued and respected, he or she is unlikely to participate in civic life, and even less likely to feel free to enjoy any public space or edifice. Therefore, to ensure that individuals are able to own private property and share public property, we must first secure obligations that will subsequently provide them with opportunities to do so.

All of the needs for the human soul that Simone Weil describes are familiar to us. In fact, many of them, such as the freedom of opinion, liberty and property ownership, we consider fundamental rights. However, as discussed next, the French activist argues that interpreting those needs in terms of rights is erroneous and does not guarantee their fulfillment.

I have presented Sartre’s and existentialism’s position that freedom makes us responsible for ourselves and everyone else, and I have also discussed Weil’s account of obligations towards all people along with the human soul’s needs being met through those obligations. Given that we are a society where self-reliance prevails and freedom is measured in terms of rights, can Sartre and Weil’s philosophies provide helpful insight in addressing our social and economic problems? The upcoming chapter explores that

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 35.
question and investigates possible, remedial courses of action to those issues presented earlier.
DIVORCING RIGHTS FROM FREEDOM

To address the equality gaps that currently exist in the country, Robert Putnam proposes some solutions including providing additional funds to poor families to assist in children’s education, increasing tax credits that benefit children, protecting antipoverty programs, rehabilitating ex-prisoners and reducing non-violent crime sentences, investing in school child development programs, as well as increasing funds for schools in poorer areas.\(^1\) The political scientist also suggests subsidizing mixed-income families, as well as investing in poor neighborhoods and moving poor families to better areas.\(^2\) All of Putnam’s suggestions are feasible; the problem however, is getting community members to buy into those recommendations and become involved with local officials to concretize them. This is especially difficult to do in light of the socioeconomic disparities that segregate our population.

If we, as a nation, sincerely want to overcome the inequality crisis that we are currently facing, we must be willing to reassess our present modes of interpreting and

\(^1\) Putnam, *Our Kids*, 246-260.

\(^2\) Ibid., 259-260.
exercising rights and liberty. Such reassessment would involve concurrently applying the Sartrean principle that freedom of choice makes man responsible, not just for his own life, but for all of mankind, along with Weil’s imperative of fulfilling obligations towards the human soul’s needs, a position Putnam shares, as he too, borrowing from Pope Francis, reminds us of our moral obligation to tend to our neighbors.³

Considering our country’s historical and present-day narrative, the proposed reevaluation process may appear daunting. In fact, some could attack its merits as being incompatible with America’s best interests, while others could argue that it is a fantasy. To sympathizers of either opinion, the first question I pose is whether they take responsibility for their obligations towards their fellow men, for at the heart of the problem seems to be our refusal to recognize that we, and only we can fulfill those obligations. But, assuming they do, I then ask what morally and ethically better alternative do they offer for maximizing good for the greatest number of people? The individual exercise of questioning oneself about the motives behind his/her actions and their consequences on others costs nothing and disturbs no one, except said individual’s conscience, which in turn, shows hope for better choices and corrective action moving forward. The question could then also be formulated as how do you define yourself in the face of others’ affliction? If we accept that each human being is of absolute value or is sacred, we then are also capable of constantly reminding ourselves of Weil’s statement that “if we wish to be sure of using the right words, all that is necessary is to confine

³ Ibid., 240-241.
ourselves to those words and phrases which always, everywhere, in all circumstances express only the good.”⁴ Similarly, we can habitually reflect on Sartre’s thought, “in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the time create an image of man as we think he ought to be…nothing can be good for us without being good for all.”⁵ Focusing on those principles is a stimulating starting point for any subsequent choice we make and action we pose, because they are geared towards what is always good, for all. One question is being able to define what this “good” consists of, because after all, different people value different customs, at different times and in different places throughout the globe. Essentially, this absolute good that Sartre and Weil speak of is one where, the welfare of all, i.e. the self and others, motivates our freedom of choice. This is a familiar concept to most God believers, such as Christians for whom the Bible commands to do onto others as we want done onto us. For Weil, the good calls for human relationships in order to “reach higher levels of attention, some solitude and silence”⁶ that help individuals develop the sort of impersonal attitude that she argues brings us to value each person.

Guided by the transcendent, absolute good that all human hearts long for, we find that the next task we have to undertake is separating notions of rights from freedom as Sartre and Weil envision it. In our country, we see rights as belonging to all, who are free within the boundaries of the law to do as they please to exercise those rights. However, as

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⁵ Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 17.
discussed in Chapter 3, rights exist at a personal level and cannot effectively on their own lead us to attain an impersonal state of being. That in itself is sufficient reason for dissociating rights from freedom. Putting that reason into application, it is apparent that, based on the wealth and opportunity gaps elaborated in Chapter 2, the people negatively affected by those gaps which leave universal obligations towards them unfulfilled, have difficulty pursuing their given right to happiness. They cannot or do not know how to seek said happiness because the conditions necessary in our society for them to feel free to do so are absent. Another way of illustrating this is in Putnam’s finding that educated and affluent kids are more involved in political and civic affairs, and are consequently more likely to press and have their demands heard from the government.\(^7\) In summary, we seem to have our priorities wrong in advocating the pursuit of the American dream based on rights as an absolute good, for such dream is personal and causes us to ignore our duty to meet human needs of the soul which is where said absolute, transcendent good resides.

On the other side of the equation, those of us who profit or are not on the detrimental end of those inequalities, tend to live in bubbles that prevent us from seeing those faulty or lacking conditions, that often times, we help create. Furthermore, when we do acknowledge inequalities, we blame the individuals for not taking responsibility for themselves, again failing to understand that we, as a community, might have failed to equip them with the means to take control, positive control of their lives. Our inability or unwillingness to understand others’ limited freedom is expressed for instance, when those

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\(^7\) Putnam, *Our Kids*, 234-239.
who have not and will never experience racial discrimination dismiss its existence today, when men who will never be women claim to know what women need, when those who have never experienced invasion and daily destruction view those who do as the enemy or unreasonable beings because of their retaliation methods. We do not often stop to wonder why “the other” is other, if and how we might have contributed to their otherness, especially when said otherness makes us uncomfortable. What we most often do, is diminish the other’s situation and conclude that it is not our responsibility to address it. It is true that we have to compartmentalize and prioritize, that each is responsible for giving his life a direction, making his choices and accepting the consequences of those choices. Nevertheless, such logic applies only when we all start with a clean slate, equal circumstances, and have equal chances of having our needs met. If we acknowledge that we live in relation to others, we must understand that they too necessarily live vis-à-vis us. Therefore, when their needs are not met, much less addressed, and to make matters worse, when we deny that fact, we simply cannot expect any person to feel free to exercise any right, because said person, feeling dehumanized, does not have any faith in others. Weil expresses such sentiment when she says, “when a man’s life is destroyed or damaged by some wound or privation of soul or body, which is due to other men’s actions or negligence, it is not only his sensibility that suffers but also his aspiration towards the good.”

Another way in which rights threaten freedom pertains to how language associated with rights tends to transform certain imbalances into standards. As pointed

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8 Miles, Simone Weil: An Anthology, 204.
out in Chapter 3, having a right carries options of making good or bad use of it. We tend to justify our actions based on our rights, so much so, that we forget we could do otherwise. For example, through the media, many people voice their attachment to their right to bear arms and to protect themselves; however some people express their opinion in such a manner that it becomes synonymous to stating that the single most effective way of protecting yourself is to actually acquire a gun. The two statements are very different, nevertheless, some often fail to see the nuance in daily vernacular, and the danger is that now, we are hesitant to interfere with the exercise of rights, even when those rights are being misinterpreted and misused. We hence carry on with our lives, applying rights that hinder the freedom of considering other possibilities, simply because we are not legally bound to do so. In presenting the ways in which rights today inadequately address the question of freedom, some challenges require attention.

One may be inclined to see unfairness in the assertion that we are guilty of not making others feel free to exercise their rights, but let us recall that our freedom does not dismiss accountability for others, quite to the contrary, it requires it. We should also remember that others have carried our burdens, ensuring our wellbeing and prosperity. This is evident when we look at how our country was built and how many facets of our existence, from political and religious to gastronomical, are deeply intertwined with other cultures and countries. To deny the weight of our history and current narrative is to promote frustration among and beyond ourselves which sooner or later creates trouble. Another challenge to my argument is the fact that we simply cannot always know and control how other people feel. In fact, existentialism tells us that what one feels is his
own, and Simone Weil also stipulates that freedom of expression is an individual endeavor. This is probably the most difficult hurdle to overcome in bridging inequalities and improving conditions for freedom, because it truly is beyond our abilities to know, understand everything and agree with everyone. Such limitation marks the importance of focusing on the human obligations Weil describes, because those are the same for all people and are guided by human conscience. Last but not least, we have an innate penchant for engaging in power struggles, as we want things done according to our will as much as possible, and because nature is such that some people want to rule while others want or need to be ruled. It would then appear that separating an impersonal conception of freedom from rights is quite problematic, however, problematic does not equate to impossible.

Universal freedom, the one that makes each and all feel free requires that we break away from seeing rights as entitlements and constantly remind ourselves that rights are not based or directly linked to love and the good. Instead, we should learn to quiet ourselves, muting the noise of pride, power manipulations, ignorance/indoctrinations and fear, so that we may hear and listen to the feeble voice or shouts of others. Doing so can, not only help us put ourselves in others’ shoes, but it can also assist us in identifying our own limitations in ascertaining what we think we know, along with our possible bearing on our fellow men’s afflictions when present. But how do we learn those new behaviors? One answer is through an education system that promotes the study of humanities.
THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

In order to have wise, responsible, honest, and incorruptible leaders, we need citizens of the same caliber, because after all, our pool of candidates comes from the citizenry. Besides the home, school is where we primarily learn how to think and behave. Therefore, it is important that academic establishments at all levels, from pre-kindergarten to colleges and universities, are equipped to educate well-rounded individuals, who are able to take responsibility for themselves as well as for their fellow men. And, as Weil and Putnam emphasize, those establishments need to be accessible to all.

In recent years, our country has seen a surge in the focus to further develop business and science departments within our education system, while interest in fields of study in the humanities, including English, and philosophy has substantially declined. Indeed, programs in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) have been receiving more funds along with a higher demand from students, who, aiming to have a successful and financially rewarding career, have increasingly been enrolling in those programs. Institutions that historically had a strong presence in the liberal arts, specifically in humanities have been moving away from, some completely abandoning

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certain disciplines such as culture and philosophy, with professors in those areas, at times, receiving lower compensation than their peers in business and STEM fields.\textsuperscript{11} While we should as a nation be developing technologies and seeking business practices for our prosperity, it is imperative that we do so in a manner that is ethical. However, ethics demand that we take time to evaluate options and their consequences, which in turn demands that we be able to listen to different opinions and have an honest discourse. An education that only focuses on STEM or business is not necessarily concerned with ethics beyond teaching students to respect and follow rules. Questions pertaining to how and why we do things, the meaning of our existence and the overall, big picture that shapes communities, go beyond technical and business arenas, and are precisely why we need humanities.

Disciplines within the humanities such as language, history, literature, art, religion and philosophy expose us to diverse modes of seeing and interpreting the world, not only in terms of the media used, e.g. painting, writing, singing, but also in terms of the diversity among the creators of those works and their points of view, which enrich our receptive and critical thinking skills. Given our global economy, our deep and broad international affairs, and given how involved we are in social media, it is imperative that we be aware of our actions and how they affect others, nationally, as well as internationally. Humanities help develop students’ creative and critical thinking skills, which lead to more thoughtful and moral decisions. Today, information circulates fast, and we have grown accustomed to obtaining results even faster. We do not necessarily

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
take or have the time to isolate ourselves anymore, as Sartre and Weil suggest, in order to seek silence and reflect on the meaning and impact of our lives. This current state of being as a nation encourages individualistic behaviors that narrow our minds, and make us more susceptible to being manipulated as Tocqueville warned, and current scholars note. Furthermore, philosophy, which is concerned with the study of human knowledge, existence, reason, and values, is at the origin of many scientific branches such as economics, physics, and psychology, which shows the importance of the field itself.

Our government should encourage and support academic institutions in integrating more liberal arts, specifically humanities in their core curriculum. Doing so will enable us to educate children, starting at a young age to question why they choose to act one way as opposed to another, and how their actions affect them and other people. With time, such an education will increase their civic awareness and sense of duty towards one another, which they will hopefully continue to practice into adulthood.

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CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated our general understanding of notions of rights and freedom in the United States by exploring our nation’s democratic origins based on equality and liberty. Paralleling our strong sense of self-reliance to our ability to cooperate with one another, I summarized our historical and modern day successes as a democracy. I then discussed how in said democracy, there have been and continue to be serious inequalities with respect to income and opportunity that impact our population, those inequalities restricting access to education and advancement in our society for many. Probing into the root causes for those gaps, I explored different conceptions of freedom. First, I analyzed the existentialist view of freedom, more closely through existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, who states that freedom is an individual taking responsibility for himself and for all of mankind through his choices and actions. To Sartre’s position, I then juxtaposed philosopher, Simone Weil’s needs of the human soul and our obligations to meet those needs by doing what is always good, for everyone, everywhere. I also examined notions of rights through Weil’s perspective, distinguishing them from obligations, and noting their inadequacy in satisfying the soul’s necessities. I showed that due to their personal nature, rights, while providing benefits, can create friction with impersonal values of equality and freedom when they are fixated and limited by personal relationships, language and interpretation. Finally, building on Sartre and Weil’s philosophies of freedom, I argued that in order to address inequalities that plague
us, we first need to divorce our general understanding of rights from the concept of freedom so that we may become aware of our limitations in understanding others’ limited or suppressed freedom. By separating the two concepts, we can begin to think of obligations that we have towards one another by virtue of being free, and envisage choices and efforts to remedy to our current socioeconomic gaps. Lastly, I emphasized the value of an education system in the country that integrates humanities because the study of disciplines within the humanities is an essential tool in developing minds to think creatively, critically, morally and ethically.

We often hear and say that freedom is not free, however, its cost should not be imposition, it should be a choice to first recognize that each and every person, not just those we choose, is of absolute value, not because of our relationships with said person or what he or she contributes to us and our rights, but simply because he or she exists, and because human beings exist, we are also obligated to protect what is sacred and impersonal in them by accommodating their needs. Freedom is a struggle, that much we know or ought to know. But it should not be the sort of struggle that aims at staying ahead and securing our rights at the expense of others, it should be a continuous struggle leading to hard choices of taking steps forward and often back in order to maximize the potential of all people to achieve good. Whether this is attainable is irrelevant and should not be a deterrent from constantly trying, not if we are sincerely concerned with the betterment of humanity.


