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Freedom to and Freedom from

Clare C. Hagan

There are different kinds of freedom. There are *freedoms-to*, such as the freedom to protest, to express one's self, and to act without constraint. But there are also beneficial *freedoms-from*, such as freedom from injustice, freedom from discrimination, and freedom from fear. Where *freedoms-to* always involve the right of the individual to act, *freedoms-from* involve the right of an individual not to be acted upon. When one thinks of freedom in this manner, the question, "If I cannot express my hatred, am I less free?" then becomes whether hate, or certain types of hate, can rob people of enough *freedoms-from*—such as the freedom from oppression and trepidation—to outweigh the right of an individual to express his or her hatred.

Ethical actions can never be considered in a vacuum. Although the question is "am I less free?" other people are affected by the expression of my hate. I am not some special case: I am an individual in society. The original purpose of expression is, after all, to communicate with another, so others are necessarily involved. Because this action affects other people, it is useful to consider Kant's idea of a categorical imperative, the idea that one should "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:421). Then one must consider, if I express my hatred are others less free? If others express their hatred, am I less free? Unless one is to presume that "my hate" is somehow a special case, the correct question to ask is "If we, as people, are not allowed to express our hate, are we less free?" This is an issue which must be considered in the context of society.

When people come together in a society, individuals often choose to give up certain *freedoms-to* in order to obtain beneficial *freedoms-from*. This may, at first, appear to be a given, yet there are schools of thought such as anarchism and libertarianism that look on any constraint or deprivation of *freedoms-to* as something negative; nevertheless, society for the most part, has

agreed to give up such things as the freedom to kill and steal without restraint in favor of the freedom from being killed and freedom from having one's possessions stolen. The triumph of states and social contracts in today's society reflects the general agreement that there is utility in this idea of giving up a freedom-to-act in order to gain a more beneficial freedom-from-being-acted-upon. Through this seemingly paradoxical practice, a society is made freer through constraint. With scant exceptions, this policy has endured wherever and whenever human beings have gathered together in a society, from Hammurabi's code on to today.

Although restricting the freedom to act in certain ways can be beneficial to a society and make for freer citizens able to live with some measure of safety and security, should the freedom to express hatred be counted among those which should be restricted? There are certain types of hate, the expression of which promote beneficial *freedoms-from* rather than suppressing them. Expressing hatred of injustice or poverty or systematic oppression can lead other voices to declare their solidarity. Speaking out against problems is often the first step to finding a solution. In this case, allowing someone to express his or her hatred would directly promote beneficial *freedoms-from*, such as freedom from injustice, poverty, and systematic oppression in addition to allowing that person the *freedom-to* express him or herself.

But not all hate is equal, and not all hate is directed at harmful problems in need of a solution. Perhaps the most destructive form of hatred is that which is dehumanizing. An expression of dehumanizing hatred can be extremely harmful, depriving its targets of very necessary *freedoms-from*. Dehumanizing hate is that which denies the fundamental Truth of a human being, the complexity within every person, and the human dignity owed to all. The destructive potential of dehumanizing hatred is borne out in both fiction and in fact. One example of dehumanization in literature is not even, technically, dehumanization, though it is a

stunning example of how using language which treats a living thing as an object can make that living thing easier to harm. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, two characters must kill their cat so it does not attract attention after they flee their home. "I'll take care of it, Luke said. And because he said *it* instead of *her*, I knew he meant *kill*. That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real," (Atwood 192). As this passage illustrates, treating a living thing as an object can have pernicious consequences, especially when directed through expressions of hate. During the Rwandan Genocide, the Hutu's referred to the Tutsis as cockroaches. During the Holocaust, the Nazis referred to the Jews as rats. The perpetrators of these genocides knew the same thing that Margret Atwood's character discovered. Dehumanizing expressions of hate can lead directly to the ultimate act of dehumanization: to kill another person. When these expressions lead to the deprivation of a person's *freedom-from* unjust murder, the *freedom-to* express one's dehumanizing hate ultimately perpetuates less freedom in the world. The freedom gained in the expression is nothing compared to the freedom which is lost.

There are different types of dehumanizing hatred, beyond the most obvious example of language which refers to a person as an object or animal with the intention of making that person appear less human. One example of this is prejudiced language. Hateful language based in prejudice subordinates the characteristics of a person as an individual and affirms that he or she is not, in fact, a distinct person: it only acknowledges that person as a member of a group. Whenever someone says that "all people in ____ group are a certain way" it denies the variation and complexity which is possible for the people in that group and it treats them instead as a faceless, homogenous mass. It de-personalizes the members of that group, and when they are no longer people, they are easier to attack. Someone would be much more likely to accuse an entire

group of a fault, such as dimwittedness, rather than to accuse every single individual person within that group, face to face. When individuality within a group is denied, harmful expressions of hate can seep into the consciousness of a society and things which are not true of individuals within that group can affect them nevertheless. The consequences of racist and sexist ideas perpetuated by hateful expressions in our society show that this can deprive people of their freedom of individuality, as well as freedom from oppression and inequality. In the end, expressions of hate—when paired with dehumanizing and prejudiced language—deprives people of so many beneficial *freedoms-from* that the *freedom-to* express that hate shrinks small in comparison. In these instances, an inability to express prejudiced hate does not make one less free.

Another type of dehumanizing hatred is hatred which is directed at the whole of another person. Wholly despicable people can only be found in the realms of fiction; true human beings are far too complex, far too varied to be wholly good or wholly evil. When one directs his or her hatred at the whole of a person, he or she must necessarily ignore the complexity inherent in every human being. Not only does this type of hatred reduce the intricacy of another, exposing them to the loss of freedom often found in the wake of dehumanizing hatred, but this brand of malice also robs the person who acts upon it of his or her *freedom-to* the truth. To hate another human flattens their true depth; one is hating—in effect—a lie one tells to one's self. This is also a form of self-hatred, for when one hates another person, they direct their hate at a shared fragment of common experience and common form inherent in all human beings—including the one who hates. In the end, dehumanizing hatred is not only caustic for the ones at whom it is directed; dehumanizing hatred is also harmful for the person who acts upon the impulse to hate the totality of another human being. The person who hates the whole of another person not only

endanger another's *freedoms-from* harm when they permit this especially vicious kind of hatred, they also rob themselves of their own *freedom-to* empathy, clarity, and truth.

This discussion leaves several questions to be answered. Who can judge what hatred and what language should be considered dehumanizing? Should deterrents be put in place? If so, what should the punishment or penalty be? The issues these questions raise are complex and highly problematic. For this reason, I want to be clear that I am not advocating for a system which regulates hate speech. If people were appointed to decide which expressions of hate are considered harmful, their choices could easily divide the list between the expressions which are beneficial to the deciders versus the ones which criticize the deciders. If an expression of hate were directed towards corrupt systems, it might be considered by the deciders to be harmful even though it could be a beneficial warning to the society as a whole. The idea that certain expressions of hate are harmful is better applied as a self-regulating idea than an idea to be enforced by an easily corrupted system. I am not arguing in favor of the thought police. My argument is simply that certain expressions of hate make us less free. It is true that there are beneficial expressions of hate which can be directed at problematic systems or actions and make those problems more likely to be fixed. But when expressions of hate rob the targets of more freedom than is gained in the expression, we, as people, are made less free.

Works Cited

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