

# **The Nature of True Freedom I: Balancing Personal Rights and Collective Responsibilities**

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*Most men, after a little freedom, have preferred authority with the consoling assurances and the economy of effort which it brings.*

-Walter Lippmann. A Preface to Morals

In examining the nature of true freedom, I am guided by three independent though related dictums. First, I propose that true freedom requires a balancing between a concern for individual personal rights and a concern for collective, shared responsibility. Second, I believe that true freedom requires a society in which there is a convergence of interests among all sectors of this society. Third, true freedom requires the construction of a shared vision of the future so that members of a society may determine a sustained course of action that ensures both personal rights and collective responsibilities. It is a pathway into the future that is founded on a societal harmony of interests. I consider the first of these notions in this essay and the other two in subsequent essays.

## **The Conflicting R's: Rights and Responsibilities**

As I address the challenge of achieving true freedom, it is appropriate to turn as I have in the previous essays in this series to Erich Fromm's social-psychological analysis. Fromm believed that the affirmation of others and the union of the individual with others, which is critical to true freedom, requires a concern for collective responsibility, not just individual rights. He writes eloquently in *Escape from Freedom* of the basis of true (or positive, to use his term) freedom in what he calls the "spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality" (Fromm, 1941, p. 258). Fromm describes spontaneous activity in terms of the relationship between the individual and the society of which they are a member (Fromm, 1941, pp. 260-261):

We have said that negative freedom [false freedom: freedom from but not freedom to] by itself makes the individual an isolated being, whose relationship to the world is distant and distrustful and whose self is weak and constantly threatened. Spontaneous activity is the one way in which man can overcome the terror of aloneness [Jung's numinous] without sacrificing the integrity of his self; for in the spontaneous realization of the self, man unites himself anew with the world—

with man, nature, and himself. Love is the foremost component of such spontaneity; not love as the dissolution of the self in another person, not love as the possession of another person, but love as spontaneous affirmation of others [collective responsibility], as the union of the individual with others on the basis of the preservation of the individual self.

In suggesting an alternative to Nazi authoritarianism, when attempting to make sense of a world gone mad in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm proposes—as did Teilhard de Chardin (1955)—that the basis of freedom must be the sharing of responsibility and commitment. It is the expression of love, according to Fromm, that balances off the need for individual rights (as a vehicle for one to overcome one's existential anxiety) with the societal need for collective responsibility.

### **Tension, Love and Grace**

The polarity between individual rights and collective responsibility, according to Fromm, provides a dynamic and highly productive tension in society that is ultimately resolved through human love, a mature blending of rights and responsibilities in relationship with other people. Love as an organizing feature of society helps us overcome the inherent insecurities and even terror we associate with mortality. This transcendent awareness, according to Fromm, is under conditions of true freedom, manifested in commitment.

More than a decade later, in his analysis of American culture (1955) Fromm comes to the same conclusion, that love is the overarching, central feature of true, liberating freedom:

There is only one passion which satisfies man's need to unite himself with the world, and to acquire at the same time a sense of integrity and individuality, and this is love. Love is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self. It is an experience of sharing, of communion, which permits the full unfolding of one's own inner activity. The experience of love does away with the necessity of illusions. (Fromm, 1955, p. 31).

While Fromm speaks of love as the basis for a blending of rights and responsibilities and, consequently, as a basis for a new freedom—a classic humanistic perspective—other writers introduce a more transcendent and spiritual element. They speak of the "grace" that is required of true freedom (May, 1988, p. 139). Grace, in turn, comes from a divine presence or from a shared commitment to community and to some all-embracing and sustaining sense of collective purpose coupled with a recognition of the divine worth of the distinctive, individual person ("personal grace"). There is a need for consecration and

covenant in such a community. There must be a sense of trust and, ultimately, faith in one's ability to collaborate with others to create a sustainable and worthy future that nourishes both the individual and the collective soul. We can sustain this future, in part, because we need no longer act alone but can rely instead on the support of other people in the community. We need this support not only because we can't do it alone but also because there will never be completion but only progress, and there will never be contentment but only a continuing challenge. Freedom is painful and in need of continuing community support (May, 1988).

### **Individualism and Habits of the Societal Heart**

At the heart of the dialogue that Fromm introduced is a basic question about the relationship between freedom and responsibility. This is a relationship that is often strained in a society that emphasizes individualism—such as that found in the United States. In reflecting on the American culture in *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) speak of the personal emptiness that lies at the end of the successful quest for total autonomy. Carol Gilligan (1982) similarly describes the inadequacies of individual rights when they are not integrated with collective responsibility. What are the parallels between the individual developmental process toward maturation, which includes a concern for both rights and responsibilities, and the social developmental process toward a free and just society?

In studying the development of a personal sense of morality, Gilligan (1982) proposes that American society has tended to emphasize individual rights at the expense of collective responsibilities for the past two centuries. In part. This is because American society has been dominated by an emphasis on distinctiveness and separation in contrast to an emphasis on connectedness and similarities between people. This emphasis, in turn, has been reinforced by the American economic and political systems.

### **True Freedom in Eastern Europe**

During our interviews in Hungary and Estonia, we learned of people's concern for balancing personal rights and collective responsibilities. In America and many Western European countries, there is an overemphasis on individual rights and an inadequate emphasis on collective responsibilities (Gilligan, 1982). The Hungarians and Estonians we interviewed generally seemed to begin with a rather "natural" concern for collective responsibility; they had greater difficulty in recognizing the nature of and means for supporting individual rights, although they all were well aware of the horrible consequences of living in a society where these individual rights were ignored or violated.

Several of our interviewees indicated that freedom means responsibility. Professor Brichacek was most explicit: "Freedom means for me responsibility- responsibility to my inner voice, responsibility to my friends, responsibility for the future generation. . . . Freedom is to [take] this responsibility just according to your own will, just according to your own values ... just according to your own best ideas. Freedom means to me to realize my responsibility by means that I find to be appropriate." He was articulate about the dimensions of this responsibility. When he is free, he can be responsible to his friends, to the future generation, to the cosmos, and perhaps most importantly, to his inner voice.

Similarly, an Estonian reformer declared, "Freedom is . . . a willingness to give up something, to make choices." Yet for this Czech and this Estonian, there was very little sense of the meaning of freedom with regard to their own individual rights. If they are each to be guided by their inner voice in deciding what must be given up, then how are their rights assured to act upon their inner voice and to sacrifice in a way that yields a social benefit? They must be provided with some individual protections, as long as their actions don't infringe upon the rights of other people. If a Czech, an Estonian, or a Hungarian is to be responsible to his or her friends and future generations, then how can this person be assured that he or she will have the right and ability to act upon this sense of responsibility as a neighbor and citizen?

What will prevent people in authority from blocking responsible citizens from meeting their responsibilities? What will prevent leaders from distorting or manipulating the sense of responsibility? These questions can only be answered if sufficient attention is given to the other half of the equation, and this is one area in which Americans and American society might serve as an appropriate model. Beginning with the Bill of Rights, Americans have certainly given considerable attention to protecting individual rights, including the right to act upon one's sense of responsibility. How do we find the appropriate balance between rights and responsibility in our own society as well as in other societies operating in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world? I would suggest that the balancing act is becoming more difficult given the new and greater challenges associated with something I am calling VUCA-Plus (Bergquist, 2020).

### **The Two R's and VUCA-Plus**

The challenges faced in achieving true freedom following collapse of the Soviet Union are not easy to meet—whether we are talking about the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century or the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As I have just suggested, the task has become more complicated in recent years. This is because we are living in a world that is becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain and complex. It is filled

with ambiguity. Taken together these four factors constitute what is now often identified as VUCA (using the first letter of each word). I have added two other factors to the VUCA challenge (Bergquist, 2020). They are turbulence and contradiction. If an accurate portrayal of most 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies, then I would suggest that VUCA-Plus is making any balance between personal rights and collective responsibility that much more difficult.

We are threatened at a personal level by all the elements of VUCA-Plus and wish to hunker down—defending our own home, our own livelihood and our own community and nation at the expense of other people, other communities and other nations. Our legitimate concern about personal rights devolves into siloed individualism, isolation and alienation from the world in which we live. We are also threatened collectively and see the value of working together to resolve the many challenges associated with VUCA-Plus. We know that we can't "go it alone." We even become dependent on other people, our community and our nation. We regress under the threat of VUCA-Plus to a more primitive reliance on our leaders and institutions. Collective responsibility devolves into authoritarian rule.

With potential increases in difficulty regarding the balancing of right and responsibilities comes the need for new tools—or the reintroduction of old, proven tools (that have been neglected)—that can be engaged in a constructive dialogue addressing the nature of this societal balance. I offer several ideas and one powerful tool that might be of assistance when introducing this dialogue in many different forums.

### **The Balancing Act**

As human beings, we are not inclined to balance major priorities—such as personal rights and collective responsibilities. To do this balancing, we need to consider both the upside and downside of each option. We prefer not to consider the negative sides—for they create collective stress. We would prefer to isolate (censor) the inconvenient truth and demonize those who are conveying this truth. Clearly, the challenge is great of achieving true freedom if it requires a balancing of rights and responsibilities. Such a balance will only be achieved through constructive dialogue. In order to successfully convene this dialogue regarding future policies, we must take several factors about the human psyche into consideration. As psychologists, we might have something important to say about the process of collective policy formulation. We have learned (and perhaps have always known), that mind and heart must always dance together—especially

when it comes to the exceptional challenge posed by the creation and maintenance of true freedom.

### **Thinking in Systems: The Outcomes May Surprise Us**

While we, *homo sapiens*, are among the brightest members of the animal kingdom, there are some major limits in our capacity to think clearly and systematically about the challenging conditions we face. First, we are inclined to view our complex world in single dimensions: it is hard for us to take multiple, interacting variables into account at the same time. Our colleagues at M.I.T. have created a powerful modeling tool called system dynamics that enables us to take multiple variables into consideration at the same time (Meadows, 2008). The modeling tools being used by their colleagues at Harvard and other universities and research centers similarly enable multi-variable analyses.

And what are the outcomes of these analyses? Two particularly relevant insights are generated as they relate to the interplay of rights and responsibilities. First, there is the matter of rapid expansion in the forces operating on each side of this societal dilemma. Something that is often called the *Power Law* is operating. As in the case of many systemic phenomena (such as birth rates, global warming and nuclear explosions), the spread of passion regarding each side is exponential. The power law dynamic might be labeled a *Nuclear Effect* given the parallel to the exponential power of nuclear explosions. This parallel has often been drawn by those members of the Santa Fe Institute (who are often those involved in both the nuclear research done at Los Alamos located near Santa Fe, New Mexico and in the more recent study of complex social systems).

As concerns for individual rights increase (as a result of some societal crisis, such as a pandemic or economic collapse) so do concerns regarding collective responsibility tend to increase. Gregory Bateson (1972) providing this accelerating process with a quite formidable title: complimentary schizogenesis and shows how it plays out in many societies. Members of a society find that their autonomy and individual benefits are being threatened, so they demand judicial reforms or even take up arms to defend their rights. Other members of this society either enforce existing laws that protect those lacking power (economic or political) or demand new, more protective legislation or increased funding for programs protecting the under-served. They might even go to

war (or at least lead the protests) against the graven individualists. One day we look out at our world, and nothing appears to be amiss. The next day we find that our world has changed forever and that the warring factions are weaponizing for their attack on one another. Freedom of any type is in deep jeopardy.

The second insight concerns delay. System dynamic theorists suggest that delays in any complex system often have a greater impact on the way this system operates than does any of its other properties (such as the nature and size of entities operating inside the system). Delays can occur in the movement of entities inside a system, as well as movement of information about these entities. The mobilization of opposing parties is quick and dramatic because the underlying concerns have been festering for quite a while. Things are festering. The wounds are covered over rather than healed. When everything does break open, the delayed and stored up energy comes immediately and forcibly to the fore. All “hell” breaks loose. The *Delay Effect* might be just as important as the Nuclear Effect—and will often complement this effect—when it comes to a major societal dilemma such as the balance between rights and responsibilities.

The results generated by system-based analyses are often counter-intuitive—that is to say, the models often come up with outcomes that are quite different from what was anticipated. We are doing what is intuitively and humanely “the right thing”. We are advocating for those who are under-served in our society. However, the outcomes of our caring actions end up being of little value. Those who are under-served grow dependent on the government or even resent the “patronizing” and often repressive control being exerted by government on their life. We might instead help to pass laws that open up free enterprise and motivate individual initiatives only to find that the “big guys” have used these entrepreneurial openings to squish any new ventures.

There is a second set of systemic insights that is equally disruptive of the usual way we think about and reason through challenging issues—such as we find in a VUCA-Plus World. These insights come from the emerging interdisciplinary field of study that is often labeled *Complexity Theory*. This field focuses on systems that are not just complicated (many parts), but also complex (many interdependent parts)—and it is in their complexity that many systems become chaotic (Miller and Page, 2007). While there are many troubling and unanticipated insights emerging from this field, the one that has received the most public attention is the *Butterfly Effect*.

First offered by Edward Lorenz in his meteorological research, this effect concerns our inability to offer valid predictions regarding the outcome of complex events given that a single (often quite small) event somewhere in the world (the fluttering of a butterfly's wings) can have a profound, widespread impact. It is because complex systems contain many interdependent parts that one small part can have a major impact on the entire system. It takes only one abuse of individual rights to trigger a demand for major legislative reform. It takes only one fumbling of a new social initiative to provoke a wide-spread demand for defunding of all "welfare" programs (that are inherently "ineffective").

Jay Forrester, the original architect of System Dynamics, often declared: "don't just do something—stand there!" One of Forrester's esteemed students and colleagues, Donella Meadows (2008, p. 171) has put it this way: "[There is a broad-based and compelling tendency] to define a problem not by the systems' actual behavior, but by the lack of our favorite solution." Meadows (2008, pp.171-172) goes on to describe a typical decision-making process:

Listen to any discussion in your family or a committee meeting at work or among the pundits in the media, and watch people leap to solutions, usually solutions in "predict, control or impose your will", without having paid attention to what the system is doing and why it's doing it.

Forrester, Meadows, and their colleagues strongly suggest that we need to reflect on our assumptions before taking any action. This is quite a challenge when VUCA-Plus confronts us everywhere and when levels of collective anxiety are high—but we do have the modeling tools to engaged in this systemic consideration. But what do we do with the often counter-intuitive outcomes of these considerations? I would suggest that we must slow down our thinking when doing this work.

### **Slow Thinking**

We need not travel far (just to a nearby building at M.I.T.) to find a complementary perspective on human decision making. I have already briefly cited the work of MIT's Daniel Kahneman. He is the Nobel prize winning author of *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Kahneman, 2013) who focuses on processes of human decision making. Kahneman suggests that we are inclined to think fast about

a pressing (and complex) problem—especially one (as I noted above) that is filled with anxiety. We should instead slow down our thinking so that we might better understand the problem and identify often untested underlying assumptions embedded in the problem. Like Forrester and Meadows, Kahneman urges us to stop for a few minutes (or a few days) before deciding and acting—especially when we are anxious or when there seems to be social pressure to quickly arrive at a decision.

As a sidebar, I can point to a story issuing from the recent reporting of Steve Dalkowski's death. Legend has it that he threw the fastest pitch ever recorded in modern baseball history. Supposedly, he was able to fire in a baseball at close to 110 miles per hour (though he was playing before the device recording the official speed was invented). While Dalkowski could pitch hard and fast, he was not very accurate. His errant pitches over the backstop were noteworthy, as was his strike-to-walk ratio (more of the latter than the former). Dalkowski was portrayed (as "Nuke" LaLoosh) by Tim Robbins in the movie, *Bull Durham*, with his fastball flying everywhere.

Tragically, Dalkowski was defeated by not only his lack of control as a pitcher, but also his lack of control as an alcoholic. Nevertheless, for a short period of time, he was a good pitcher and almost made it to the major leagues. What was the secret? He slowed down his pitch and found more accuracy in throwing the ball over the plate. As they say in baseball, he gained some "command" of his pitches—he learned how to "pitch" rather than just "throw". I would suggest that the same principle applies to 21<sup>st</sup> Century problem-solving. Our *Dalkowski Theorem* is that we must slow down our thinking if we want to be accurate—otherwise we will never make it to the major leagues! We need to thoughtfully pitch rather than simply throw hard (or solve fast)—otherwise we will remain a "bush leaguer".

Now back to Cambridge, we join Kahneman and his behavioral economics colleagues. They write about the frequent use of *Heuristics* (simple, readily applied rules) that enable fast thinking to occur. Many heuristics serve us well in addressing daily-problems and making decisions about mundane and often reoccurring matters. However, they often get us in trouble when we face unique and multi-tiered problems—such as formulating policies regarding rights and responsibilities. We might be inclined to "throw hard" and engage a simple values-based heuristic about saving the life of a single person: "Your failure to pass this new health care legislation is

endangering the life of my mother!” The opposition’s concerns about the proposed health care legislation is immediately rejected, even in its more benign form: “Your opposition is nothing more than a Nazified decision to ‘let them bleed!’”

We have torpedoed the discussion, demonized the opposition and sped up the response being formulated by our “opponent.” All of us are throwing hard and fast rather than engaging in slow, thoughtfully pitching. In applying this heuristic to the rights/responsibility dilemma we decide immediately to “stop the bleeding!” We make it quite personal: “people [including my mother] will live if this bill is passed.” Or “you don’t really give a damned about other people or about me when you refuse to pass this bill!” If we do sit back and do some thinking, then we are likely to be declared “inhuman” and indifferent to human welfare. On the other hand, if we quickly assess those proposing the new legislation as nothing more than “bleeding heart” liberals and visionaries, then we have made it just as personal. Our oppositional colleagues have become our enemies. The Nuclear Effect is fully in effect and complementary schizmogogenesis is flourishing.

### **Regression and the Search for a Silver Bullet**

What then is the solution? How does thoughtful, systemic thinking and decision-making operate to help us effectively balance rights and responsibilities. Let’s cut immediately to the chase: there probably was not a silver bullet available to resolve this dilemma. We might need to slow down our thinking and challenge our humane, short-term perspective on preserving personal rights or ensuring collective responsibility with a broad-based application of slow and systemic thinking and dialogue. However, good intentions might not be enough. We need to do a better job of thinking in a systemic manner, as Forrester and Meadows propose, but this might also not be enough.

For a moment we need to stand still rather than do something—especially as we face VUCA-Plus realities. Our slow thinking might be leading us to the difficult and anxiety-provoking conclusion that our policy must change. This recognition, in turn, creates more anxiety and pushes us back to fast thinking. Our rational system of thought and problem-solving will easily collapsed. The baseball once again might fly over the backstop. Hell breaks loose everywhere in the world. Like Dalkowski, we (collectively) seek out something that will numb the pain of failure.

The movement to slow, systemic thinking will not be easy. In many ways, the outcomes of our attempts over the past three decades (in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world) could have been predicted. As I have documented in previous essays in this series on freedom there have often been strong pulls back to authoritarian perspectives and practices. We know that all VUCA Plus issues are usually not handled in a thoughtful manner by virtually anyone in the world. These issues tend to be heavily laden with anxiety—and this anxiety impacts on the way we think about and feel about the source of the anxiety. The anxiety must be metabolized (transformed) in a way that contains and reduces the anxiety (Bergquist, 2020).

Typically, the metabolism only takes place by regressing to a lower level of thought and feeling. We turn “primitive” in our assessment of the lurking force or entity that wishes to do us harm. For instance, Christakis (2020, p. 21) notes that bats are often the ultimate culprits in the transmission of viruses (for some reason pathogens move easily between bats and humans). They are perfect sources of evil, having often been the source in many societies of profound villainy and horror (Dracula?). We envision bat-like, shadowy viruses lurking in our closets, ready to bite us in the neck and turn us into flesh-eating zombies – or worst yet into political opponents.

In seeking to metabolize our anxiety, we not only identify evil forces and figures, but also seek to find safe refuge from this evil, by looking to a leader who can fight against or flee from this evil. This leader will offer simple ways in which we can reduce our anxiety (Bergquist, 2020a). These ways often include not only identifying the enemy of evil who “caused” the underlying problem and/or blocked its solution, but also providing a simple portrayal of the problem itself. Such has been the case with “deliberations” regarding herd immunity.

As Daniel Kahneman (2013) and other behavioral economists have noted, we are likely to engage in “fast thinking” when confronting immediate, anxiety-filled challenges. The “slow thinking” that is required to sort through the VUCA-Plus labyrinth has not been widely engaged in the United States during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The United States is not alone. An encouraging report card is hard to be found in any other country. Anxiety-provoked regression in thought, feelings and actions pervaded the world. Authoritarianism emerged and reigned supreme in many societies. Leaders were being obeyed who had no business being in this role. Stupidity filled the cracks and crevices

of constructive deliberations regarding rights and responsibilities—as well as most other matters regarding true freedom.

Truth and reality can be quite elusive. It is easy to regress individually and collectively when anxiety is saturating our thoughts and actions. As I have already mentioned, we have tools that can aide our slow, systemic analysis of pandemic problems—despite the challenges we face in confronting these problems. I am about to introduce a process that can help us do a better job in making balanced decisions based on this analysis.

## **Polarity Management**

We must leave the confines of Cambridge Massachusetts so that I might introduce a new perspective on the best way to address the challenge of finding true freedom through balancing right and responsibilities. Specifically, I turn to the work of Barry Johnson (1996), the “dean” of *polarity management*. Johnson’s perspectives and his related tools can guide our actions in the future. Johnson suggests that polarity management can be used in handling everyday dilemmas. It can also be of great value in addressing major societal contradictions—settings in which there are two or more legitimate but opposite forces at work Can polarity management help us gain a purchase on the interplay between rights and responsibilities? I believe the answer is “yes”. Along with systemic perspectives and slow thinking, polarity management might provide important guidance in the search for true freedom.

### **Both/And Rather Than Either/Or**

Many of those involved already in the deliberation regarding individual rights and collective responsibilities have framed the policy as an either/or option. I will frame our analysis around these two polar-opposite stances and begin by identifying some of the benefits and disadvantages associated with each perspective. The benefits in both cases yield both short-term (tactical) and long-term (strategic) outcomes.

**BENEFITS:  
FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS**

**BENEFITS:  
FOCUS ON COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

Motivation to Achieve  
 Freedom to Innovate  
 Absence of Arbitrary External Control  
 Ability to Protect Personal/Family  
 Interests/Property

Motivation to Cooperate  
 Support for Innovation  
 Absence of Arbitrary Internal Control  
 Ability to Collectively Protect Both  
 Personal and Community  
 Interests/Property

The disadvantages I offer relate to what we don't know and what might be an unexpected and devastating outcome.

**DISADVANTAGES:  
 INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS**

Abuse of Unregulated Personal Power  
 Infringement on the Rights of Those  
 Without Power  
 Uncontrolled Accumulation of  
 Individual Wealth  
 Lost Sense of Caring for Other People  
 and the Greater Good

**DISADVANTAGES:  
 COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

Abuse of Overwhelming Collective  
 Power  
 Infringement on the Creativity and  
 Initiative of Individual Citizens  
 Uncontrolled Growth of Government  
 Lost Sense of Personal Aspiration and  
 Opportunity

Following are the typical actions steps taken to maintain and defend each of these societal positions:

**ACTION STEPS:  
 INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS**

**ACTION STEPS:  
 COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

Emphasize personal achievement  
(advertising/public figures)

Reward personal innovation and  
creativity

Enact public policies and regulations  
that protect individual rights

Enact laws that Protect Personal/Family  
Interests/Property

Emphasize Cooperate attitude  
(advertising/public figures)

Support and fund collective  
innovation

Enact public policies and regulations  
that protect against inhumane and  
destructive acts

Enact laws that Protect Community  
Interests/Property

Following are the early warning signs that typically indicate that this societal policy is not working well or creating unintended problems (I will have more to say about this analysis a bit later):

**WARNING SIGNS ABOUT  
INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS**

Abuse of Unregulated Personal Power  
Infringement on the Rights of Those Without Power  
Uncontrolled Accumulation of Individual Wealth  
Lost Sense of Caring for Other People and the Greater Good

**WARNING SIGNS ABOUT  
COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

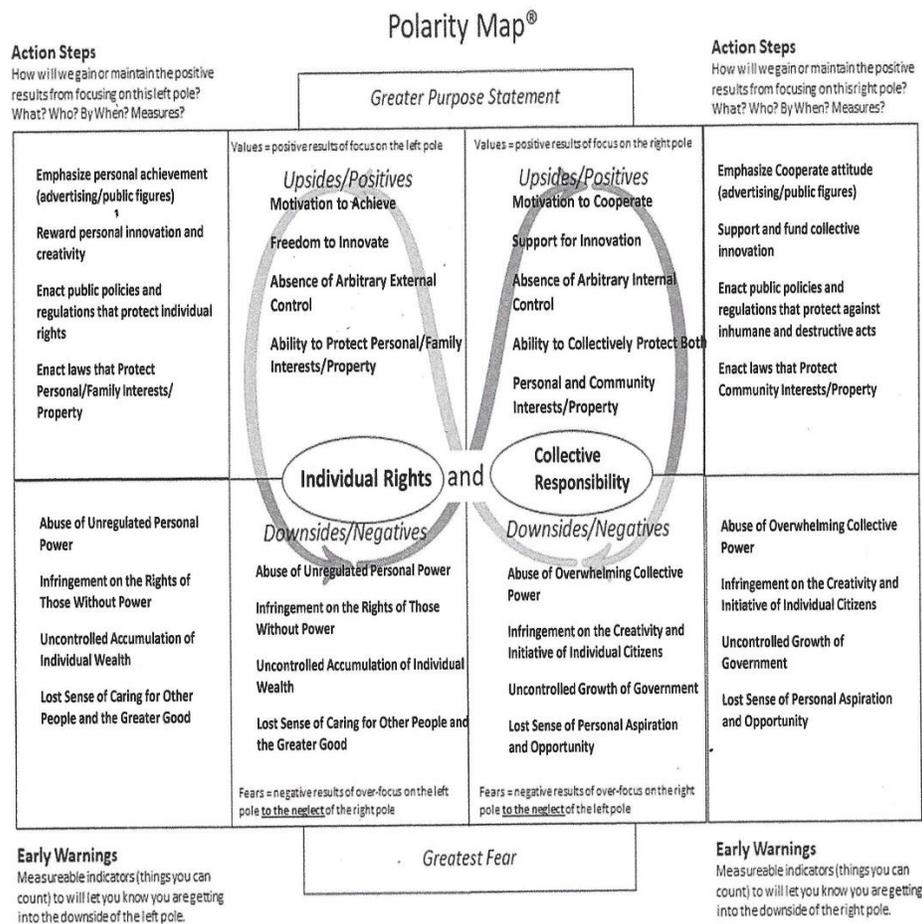
Abuse of Overwhelming Collective Power  
Infringement on the Creativity and Initiative of Individual Citizens  
Uncontrolled Growth of Government  
Lost Sense of Personal Aspiration and Opportunity

These initial summary statements regarding the pull between two societal perspectives can be framed as a polarity. What tends to occur is that we linger briefly on the advantages inherent in one of the options. Then we begin to recognize some of the disadvantages associated with this option. We are pulled to the second option. Yet, as we linger on this second option, we discover that this perspective also has its flaws and disadvantages. We are led back to the first policy—and must again face the disadvantages inherent in this first option.

The swing has begun from left top to left bottom to right top, to right bottom, back again to left top. We are whipped back and forth. As concern (and even anxiety) increases regarding each perspective, the vacillation also increases in both intensity and rapidity. This is what the dynamics of polarization is all about. There is inadequate time and attention given to each option.

**The Polarity Graph**

Here is what the polarity-based dynamics of our policy deliberations might look like if mapped on a polarity graph:



## A Polarity Analysis

With this preliminary framing and charting completed, we turn to what happens when we try to *maximize* the benefits of either side at the expense of the other side. In the case of supporting individual rights, the maximization of support for personal initiatives and ambitions would (as the epidemiological models indicate) tend to delay but ultimately accelerate the acquisition of personal wealth and power, ultimately leading to the formation of an unregulated and often

abusive oligarchy (composed of the super-wealthy). This is what Fromm described as negative freedom. Furthermore, we now know that an emphasis on personal rights does not inevitably produce increased desire to achieve or innovate. The “have-nots” are much more likely to fall into a state of despair and lethargy—alienated from the society in which they now live. We would soon witness societal disruption and even revolution as the power and wealth chasm grows wider. At some point, we might find some social reform (or at least increases in charitable contributions) but would probably find that it is too little and too late.

Conversely, if we completely override a concern about personal rights and fully adopt the collective responsibility perspective, then we are likely to witness repressive and intrusive regulations that applied indiscriminately to the lives of those living in this highly controlled society. It might be even more destructive if those living in a society know little about individual rights (as seems to have been the case with the Estonians we interviewed). There is a yearning for something different—for some corrective. Yet, this alternative option is not well known nor has it often been engaged in a society where a repressive form of collective responsibility has been in force for many years.

At the very least, there would be deeply felt (though often ill-defined) concern within a short period of time regarding the ultimate “heartlessness” of the collective responsibility perspective. Those advocating collective responsibility might have the best of intentions, but the outcomes can be counter-intuitive with citizens feeling just as alienated from the sources of power as they would be in a world dominated by personal rights. We would inevitably find that projections about the potential number of people who would be served by new public policies and priorities become just this: numbers without a focus on the individual, distinctive needs of each citizen. Local neighborhoods (often ethnically or culturally based) are torn down in favor of high-rise towers. Dehumanizing “stone cities” replace “distinctive enclaves”.

I witnessed this in Estonia when working there during the 1990s. Families had been assigned to small apartments located in tall, anonymous concrete structures. They were often being moved from another country to work in the factories of Estonia under the Soviet Master Plan [it is ironic that so-called “Russian Vodka” was actually produced in Estonia for many years under the master plan]. Life in the Tallinn Estonia high-rises was truly disheartening to witness. The men and

women I interviewed spoke of the “stone hearts” that were bred in these “stone cities.” I could not help but notice similarities between Tallinn high rise communities and the urban “development” projects of metropolitan New York. When I drive by high rises in the Bronx, I wonder if similar “stone hearts” are to be found among the residents of these buildings. Was Robert Moses’ dream of “clearing slums” to produce a better New York just another example of collective responsibility and centralized hubris run amuck? Do the stone cities really offer better life than the old, broken down tenements and ethnic neighborhoods of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century New York? Isn’t there a third option?

Social reformers would soon feel—or at least should feel—disappointed. They might even feel deeply ashamed or wounded, given the impersonal, bureaucratic and even “inhumane” decisions being made. If we are religious and view ourselves as culpable, then we might ask our deity for forgiveness. Other members of our society would be inclined to launch a vitriolic attack against those who enacted this grotesque policy. As a result, we are likely to return to a focus on distinctive personal rights—though only after many stone cities have been built and local neighborhoods destroyed in favor of “urban renewal.” We swing back and forth, leaving behind the debris of disrupted lives and disillusioned citizenry. True freedom is nowhere to be found.

Barry Johnson warns that we must not try to maximize the appeal of any one side; rather we must carefully *optimize* the degree to which we are inclined toward one side or the other as well as the duration of our stay with consideration and enactment of this side. How serious are we about focusing on this one side and how long are we going to sustain this focus? Under the best of conditions, we are living with what Erich Fromm describes as a dynamic and highly productive tension. Can we live with and in this tension?

Optimizing also means that we must find a reasonable and perhaps flexible set-point as we act in favor of one side or another. Finding these acceptable optimum responses and repeatedly redefining them is the key to polarity management. This strategy is aligned with the suggestion made by many thoughtful social commentators that a balance must be struck and integration found regarding personal rights and collective responsibilities (e.g. Lodge, 1995).

The fundamental recommendation to be made in managing this particular polarity is to remain in the positive domain of each perspective long enough to identify all (or at least most) of the key benefits and potential actions to be taken that maximize these benefits. Thinking needs to slow down and a systemic analysis must be engaged. Time should be devoted to and attention directed (in a slow and systemic manner) toward identification of potential ways in which the two perspectives can be brought together on behalf of an integrated response to the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> Century life. Consideration and compassion potentially join hands.

This polarity management recommendation is not easily enacted—especially when the stakes are high (as they certainly are regarding many contemporary societal issues). As Johnson and others engaged in polarity management have noted, effective management of polarities requires a constant process of vigilance, negotiation, and adjustments. The second option regarding collective responsibility seems to be aligned with this recommendation of dynamic vigilance. Caring public policy can easily become nothing more than numbers and the imposition of clumsy regulations.

Similarly, those espousing personal rights must be open to adjustments. Citizens cannot operate in splendid isolation, looking at and interacting with the world through their own personal silos. They must let in the world—with all its needs (and demands). In agreement with the polarity management experts, those advocating either perspective must continuously seek and refine a dynamic, flexible balance between consideration and compassion in seeking to eventually find a balance between rights and responsibilities. Each side's beneficial contributions can be enjoyed without engendering serious negative consequences. We must accompany this balance with some immediate, tangible correctives.

## **Alarm Systems**

Johnson has one more important point to make regarding the management of polarities. He identifies the value inherent in setting up an alarm system as a safeguard against overshooting either side of the polarity. It would be prudent to build in an alarm system that warns us when we may be trying to maximize one side and are on the verge of triggering the negative reactions. I have already identified some of the elements that might be included in the alarm system engaged by either perspective.

## **The Alarms of Personal Rights**

As I already noted, the alarm signal for those advocating personal rights might be a growing abuse of unregulated personal power. And infringement on the rights of those without power. How do we know if abuse and/or infringement are occurring? What is the metric for measuring abuse? This is not easily measured. We have the newspaper (and now Internet accounts) of this abuse, but these reports are inevitably biased and truth “isn’t what it used to be” (if it ever was). An imprecise measure is the number of lawsuits being enacted against those with wealth and power—and the percentage of these lawsuits that are settled in favor of the plaintiff (when compared to percentages when the defendant is not wealthy or powerful). There is also the more indirect measure centering on the actual taxes being paid by those at various economic levels. We might declare it abuse and infringement if the wealthy are paying much less in taxes than the middle class. If nothing else, an alarm should be ready-and-waiting if there are many accounts being offered from many different constituencies regarding abuse.

A somewhat easier and more creditable metric can be used when considering accumulation of individual wealth. One need only look at the income gap. If it is widening, then there is cause for concern. The term “accumulation” is particularly important here. It is not just a matter of income gap. It is also a matter of a very small number of people holding great wealth. The super-wealthy hold the power as well as the wealth. They signal the flaw in any consideration of personal rights as being a recipe for the “democratization” of wealth. When wealth is centralized, then power is centralized, and true freedom is absent.

It is the fourth signal that I have identified which is most elusive and perhaps ultimately of greatest importance. The signal might be apparent at a deep, psychological level. There would be a growing sense of helplessness and hopelessness—resulting from (and contributing to) an isolationist stance regarding societal welfare. Do many members of a society lose any sense of caring for other members of their society? Do they only worry about their immediate family or perhaps their neighbors (their “enclave”)? Is a “stone heart” just as likely to be found in a siloed personal rights-dominated society as in the high-rise communities that Soviet planners and Robert Moses created in Tallinn and the Bronx?

Is it inevitable that tribalism is afoot in the land when the rights perspective prevails? Do people lose their capacity (or motivation) to care about the welfare of those less fortunate than themselves if individual rights are emphasized? Is “trickle-down” economics nothing more than an occasional drip from the accumulated largess of those sitting in the corporate towers? How do we know that the loss of concern for other people is occurring? At some level we all “know” when inequity and indifference is abundant. Do we really need a financial signal or tangible signs of social discontent (such as demonstrations or increases in violent crime) to know that an exclusive focus on personal rights isn’t working? Does this shift in attitude need to be measurable?

### **The Alarms of Collective Responsibility**

The alarm system for safeguards against collective responsibility run amuck is to be found, as I have already mentioned, in the abuse of overwhelming collective power (using assigned to the state) and infringement on the creativity and initiative of individual citizens. As in the case of the signals for those advocating personal rights, the responsibility signals are not easily measured and are often misunderstood or ignored. We can look at such inadequate measures as the number of new laws and regulations have been passed during the past year that restrict citizen behavior, as well as the number of patents being offered for new inventions. If the rules are growing and the patents are declining, then the alarm might be triggered.

As in the case of financial signals for those advocating personal rights, there is a tangible metric that can serve as an alarm for those advocating collective responsibility. This alarm is the size of government (at all levels). Financially, we can calculate the percentage of the national wealth (GNP) that is to be found in governmental agencies. The number of government employees can also be measured, as can the ratio of funds housed in governmental agencies and those housed in non-government organizations (NGOs) that provide human services. At what level can we consider a society to be government-dominated. It is something more than the government owning and operating businesses (such as health care and banking) that could be owned privately. It is about the underlying assumption that government can do this work better and more equitably than private enterprise. When is this assumption regarding government effectiveness no longer questioned—and on the other side, when is private enterprise as being more effective no longer questioned? Alarm bells should go off on both sides if the critics have been silenced and the oppositional voices are no longer heard.

As a side note, I wish to briefly convey a personal story related to the oppositional voice. For several years, I served on the Board of Trustees of a private college in North Carolina (St. Andrews). I was flying to a graduation ceremony at the college on a small plane where my co-passenger was George McGovern, who had recently lost the national USA presidential election by a large margin to Ronald Reagan. This esteemed, but recently discarded, leader asked me why he was invited by Republican board members to be the graduation speaker at this conservative college. I proudly noted that the board had invited him to be the speaker because the “minority” voice (in this case liberalism) is most needed precisely at a point when a new “majority” (in this case conservatism) has won the day. I consider this to be a moment of true freedom and I was honored (as a liberal) to be a member of this thoughtful Board of Trustees.

Back to the alarms. There might be disillusionment among those hoping for an improved life under the auspices of a strong government based on collective responsibility. Major social unrest might arise among those populations receiving the least care and witnessing what seems to be cavalier societal disregard for their actual (distinctive) welfare. Control of policies might become more centralized and embedded in vested social and economic interests among those granted political power. Quite tragically, it has often been the most liberal governments that have generated the highest levels of corruption and scandal. Greed is not exclusive to those with great wealth. “Robber barons” come in many different shapes and sizes.

This disillusionment need not be confined to the failure of government officials to deliver on their political promises. As I have already mentioned, we might find a lost sense of personal aspirations and opportunities. While declarations that “welfare moms” are pumping out babies to keep government money coming in are largely mythic, there is an unintended consequence of governmental support that hints at growing dependency and accompanying loss of vision. It is a systemic, “chicken-and-egg” dynamic—a “poverty cycle.” No jobs are available nor are adequate education and training available to those living in poverty. As a result, these men, women and families must rely on government support. With this support comes confirmation by the government that these victims of poverty are simply incapable of making a living (the assumption of personal inadequacy) or will never find a fulfilling (or even unfulfilling) job (the assumption of a life without opportunity). No need for education or training if people of poverty are inadequate

or afforded no opportunity. The cycle of poverty is sustained and intensified (think system dynamics). As those identifying and describing the cycle of poverty have noted, the psychology of poverty (hopelessness and helplessness) might be even more difficult to overcome than the cycle. True freedom is nowhere to be found in either the psychology or cycle of poverty. Alarm signals should be sounded for those advocating a pure form of collective responsibility.

## **Conclusions**

Hopefully, with the safeguards in place and the alarm signals clearly articulated, we can address the negative consequences of each option in a constructive manner. As a result, we might even be in a place to formulate an integrative policy regarding the handling of complex societal problems. We and our Estonian colleagues might be able to move toward true freedom in our respective societies. Optimally, this formulation could be thought through in a slow manner with broader, often counter-intuitive and systemic dynamics taken into consideration. Johnson's polarity management would be joined with the wisdom of Forrester's systems thinking and Kahneman's slow thinking.

It is at this moment that we can pause and offer our gratitude to makers of analytic tools such as we have engaged in this essay. Rights and responsibilities must be balanced and integrated if true freedom is to be achieved. We soon must move beyond this analysis. We must bid farewell to our soul reliance on slow, systemic thinking and turn to planning and design. We must consider the nature of a society that must be created if rights and responsibilities are balanced and if we are to realize true freedom. We must invite citizens from Estonia and other countries in the world to join us in this adventurous enterprise. With this transition in mind, I move in my next essay to the quality of shared concerns and priorities (a "harmony" of interests) in a society of true freedom. Then, in the third essay, I explore ways in which this harmony of interest can be projected forward through formulation of and engagement with a compelling vision of the society's future.

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