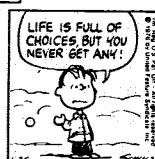


3

Crisis: Freedom as Illusion



WHAT IS FREEDOM?

Linus saved his head.
But he lost his freedom of choice.
Or did he?

Let me ask you to think of a creative risk, large or small, that you want to take—one that's a little bit frightening, one you may have been holding back from doing.

Most of us, if we think about it long enough, have some secret desire or ambition, some not-quite-ordinary dream or vision that we hesitate to carry out.

What holds us back?

Aren't we free?

What is this word "freedom," anyway? What does it mean to be free? Can we increase this freedom? Will we be happier if we do? Let's explore some memories we might have of being free. Take a moment, sit back, and recall a situation in the past in which you have felt free.

Imagine the situation: who was present, where you were. Try to recapture the feelings you associate with that freedom: feelings in your body, things you may be saying to yourself, images, etc. Then jot down some quick notes on this feeling of freedom in the spaces below. We'll come back to this again at the end of Part II,

so make just a note or two. First, list situations in which you felt free (note where and who was present) — antecedents.

Then, list where you felt this freedom in your body and in your mind (e.g., physical cues, self-statements, etc.) — behavior.

Then, note the length of time the feeling(s) lasted (days, years, a few seconds) — behavior.

Finally, note what you did as a result of the feeling(s) — consequences.

Now think of times when you haven't felt free, when you have felt trapped, controlled. Again imagine one or two situations

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in which you experienced these feelings. List situations in which you have felt "unfree" (again, noting where and who was present).

Note the body and mind cues you experienced.

Note the length of time the feeling(s) lasted.

What did you do as a result of the feeling(s)?

Freedom is a strange concept. It's hard to tell if we have it or not. Sometimes we may think we're free; yet we are really being manipulated.* Let me give an example involving our dog. We trained our dog to "stay" by pointing a finger at her and saying "stay." At first we would give her a treat if she stayed only a few

*Sometimes, of course, along specified dimensions it is clear that certain individuals have relatively more freedom than others (see Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, Chapter 6).

seconds. Then, through a series of successive approximations, we taught her to stay for longer periods. If she succeeded, we would say "Okay, come," and give her a piece of food.

One night we were leaving for the evening, and I wanted to put the dog inside the house. "Come," I said, but she wasn't interested in coming in and refused to budge. She was probably feeling proud of herself for being free enough to resist my orders. So I pointed my finger at her and said "You stay." She stayed. Then I said "Okay, you can come," and she did, right into the house.

The first "Come" was an order; the second one, "Okay, you can come," was intended (anthropomorphically!) to make the dog "feel" she had "free will," that she was "choosing" to come. Yet was she really choosing to come the second time? Or was it merely a conditioned response?

Well, we might say to ourselves, what can you expect from a dog. Certainly we human beings are too sophisticated to be manipulated* like that, right? Well, the literature seems to suggest otherwise. Conditioning can and does take place without awareness.¹

Certainly all of us want to feel free.† All of us want to feel that we are in control of our lives and that we have at least some amount of involvement in shaping our destiny. If we feel we are losing control of a situation, we may become angry and defensive.‡

*When I use the term "manipulation," I refer to instances at either extreme of a continuum of influence. Manipulation occurs either when we are devious or dishonest about our intent to influence (the end of the continuum toward deviousness) or when we take advantage of another person's "one-down" situation (the end of the continuum toward coercion).

†We all have an initial reluctance to believe that we live in a deterministic world. For example, a client I was seeing complained of feeling that he was not very assertive. Through self-observation of when he acted assertively and when he did not, the client realized that his behavior changed depending on the circumstances and the people that were around him. This confirms what the research literature suggests about our behavior being situation specific (i.e., we act differently in different situations depending upon the circumstances; see Walter Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, N.Y.: Wiley 1968). However, the patient noted that he was quite upset about the situation specificity of his behavior: "I don't like becoming aware that I act less assertively with some people than with others. It makes me feel less free, more controlled by others." We don't like to give up our illusion of freedom.

‡The importance of believing in our free will is probably nowhere more dramatically described than in Doestoevsky's *Underground Man*. The underground man stated that if he were faced with several alternatives, one of which was more attractive than the others, he would choose the more attractive alternative. However, if it could be predicted in advance which he would choose, he would choose a different alternative, simply as a display of his free

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"Hey! I'm not through seducing you yet."

Many writers have stated that we are born free—free to choose our lifestyle, our values, and our mode of interaction. The existential writers have been the most eloquent in their praise of freedom, as well as the most searing in their admonitions that we

will. If this choice, too, could be predicted, he would pick none of the alternatives, and rather than lose his free will, would prefer to kill himself.²

It is interesting that we feel our free will is lessened if other people can predict our behavior; yet we like to believe we can predict our own behavior, and we like to feel we can predict other people's behavior.

are constantly choosing who we are, regardless of whether or not we are aware of choosing. These choices determine whom we become: our existence precedes our essence.

This vision of personal freedom is eloquent as a vision. However, although we believe in the importance, and even the necessity, of freedom *as an ideal*, an important question for us to face honestly is how free we are *in fact*.

This question of personal freedom is most crucial in terms of our own individual identity. How free are we to choose our identity, our vision of ourself, who we want to become? As Linus realized, we live in a world of consequences, and our choice is often determined by the environment around us — e.g., the realization of the consequences for our actions. Until we become aware that our lives are strongly influenced by the social, physical, and internal environments, we may be living under a false image of freedom: an illusion of freedom.

Naturalness — If It Feels Good, Why Change?

All individuals are socialized to the mores and customs of the culture. We learn what kinds of behavior to engage in in order to bring rewards and praise for ourselves, and what kinds of behavior to avoid in order to escape punishment. There is a large body of literature that discusses the role of different groups involved in this socialization process, including parents, peers, the educational system, the mass media. An individual learns to accept the social conventions that are taught, and eventually internalizes them. As long as we are comfortable in our ordinary routines, and life is going smoothly for us, we feel free, and there seems little reason to change.

This can also be illustrated by a story about our dog, Gudrin. We put up a small “child barrier” in the kitchen to keep Gudrin from going into the living room. We would tell her “No” whenever she tried to jump the barrier, and we would pet her when she would lie down next to it. She soon learned to fall asleep at the foot of the barrier. A few months later, we took the barrier down during a general housecleaning. Gudrin, however, never crossed into the living room, and continued to lie down to sleep in the same spot. That spot had become hers — it felt natural and secure.

Social learning theorists would suggest that we are like Gudrin in many ways. The habits we have — both positive and

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"POLISH YOUR BUCKLES, KEEP YOUR BREECHES CLEAN ...
TAKE A BATH EVERY WEEK WHETHER YA NEED IT OR NOT..."

negative—are often the result of many years of conditioning. We do them reflexively, without thinking. They feel “natural.”

I recently saw a couple who complained that they had few friends and felt lonely. The husband was annoyed because he had to take all the initiative in calling people up for dinner, or a movie, or a general get-together. The wife said that she had never had to take the initiative in social interactions—that before she was married, men would always call her for a date. She noted that “it doesn’t feel natural for me to do the calling,” and added that she felt he was forcing her—making her feel “trapped and unfree.”

From a social learning viewpoint, what we are trained (or conditioned, or socialized) to do feels natural, feels free. Those behaviors we don’t get a chance to practice very often don’t feel natural; rather they make us feel unfree, forced. However, the feeling of naturalness, the feeling of freedom about certain actions is not innate. Rather, it is a result of our prior learning. Because certain behaviors, certain likes and dislikes, now feel natural, we cling to them tenaciously as “ours.” But we are merely clinging to an illusion of freedom; we are clinging to our past conditioning. Once we realize this, we have the choice to *unlearn* negative self-

defeating habit patterns, emotional reflex responses, and to learn new skills. With practice, the old habit patterns will disappear, will come to feel unnatural, and the new skills soon come to feel natural. The important point to emphasize is that, *unless we become aware of the process by which we are conditioned, we will continue to believe that our behavior is "natural,"* that we are "freely" choosing this "natural" way, and we will not ever be aware that we are merely choosing to return to old habit patterns that we were taught long ago.

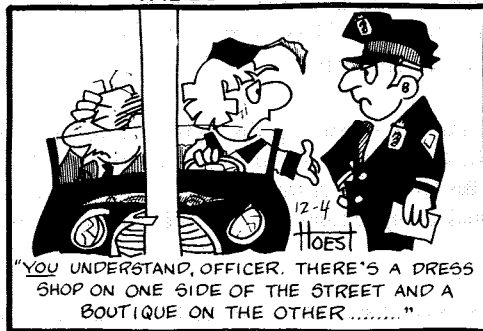
THE CRISIS

Behavior before Awareness

The first development necessary in gaining awareness of our determinism is some sort of crisis or jolt. Skinner, for example, has suggested that awareness of ourselves and our behavior is not an automatic phenomenon, and that we only become aware when this awareness has a *survival value*.³ In other words, *awareness of our behavior comes after the behavior has already occurred.* For example, it seems that at some point in almost everyone's life, there comes an event, or series of events, that jolts us out of our ordinary habit patterns of everyday living.

Often these "jolts" are small, and cause us only minor discomfort or awkwardness: e.g., telling a joke that doesn't get a

THE LOCKHORNS



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response; feeling slighted by an acquaintance; not getting a pay raise which one feels is deserved; losing something we value; not being able to decide between two alternatives. Usually we are able to dismiss these incidents as inconsequential, and quickly return to our ordinary routines.

However, sometimes the jolts are more painful, and may cause a great deal of confusion. These larger jolts—crises—may make us stand back from our ordinary routines—including our relationship to society, to other people, to ourself, and to a religious/spiritual dimension—and question them in a fundamental way. Let me suggest some types of events that may lead to this confusion.

Goals Which, Once Attained, No Longer Seem Meaningful

Every society holds out an image of the good life. In our society, the classical stereotype of the good life involves a middle-class family with two cars, money in the bank for the children's education, a home in the suburbs. Yet often, once these goals have been achieved, something seems to be missing.

Having moved along on the traditional reward structure of society from high school to college to professional or graduate school to job placements to promotions, an individual often arrives at what he has been told is happiness—and yet he does not feel it. The carrot for which he is striving, and for which society has taught him to strive, does not seem worth the price. This is illustrated in Hesse's *Siddhartha*.⁴ Siddhartha spent several years learning the ways of business from Kawaswami and the ways of love from the beautiful goddess Kamala. He wore fine clothes, earned great wealth and property. Yet Siddhartha became "nau-seated with himself, with his perfumed hair . . . with the soft flabby appearance of his skin."

Slowly, like moisture entering the dying trunk of a tree, filling and rotting it, so did the world and inertia creep into Siddhartha's soul . . . the bright and clear inward voice, that had once awakened in him and had always guided him in his finest hours, had become silent.⁵

Leaving the world of business and pleasure, he walked to the river where, disgusted and tempted to drown himself, he fell

The Now Society

By WILLIAM HAMILTON



Steel, of course, has been my life. But sometimes I wish my life had been sitting with a pretty girl in a sunny cafe in Provence, drinking Beaujolais.

asleep. That night, he dreamt that the songbird, which Kamala kept in a golden cage, had died. Thus, attaining the material goals of society may leave a sense of emptiness, a feeling that the bird in the breast has not been heard and that, in the process of attainment, some important part of us has died.

Not Being Able to Obtain the Rewards Held Out by Society

An individual is taught to work hard to achieve certain goals, and our cultural mores suggest that there will be certain rewards for hard work. In America today, however, there is no longer necessarily a direct correlation between hard work, educational training, and achievement of success. There are no clear-cut paths, no certainties. The Horatio Alger myth is breaking down. Not only have the traditional societal "carrots" been held out increasingly

later in life, but the rewards themselves have become more difficult to obtain, because of increased competition and the existence of fewer interesting, prestigious, and secure positions. After this hard work, if the rewards are not forthcoming, a person may be jolted into stepping back and questioning the cultural mores into which he has been socialized.

Interpersonal Loss

Another event that often constitutes a crisis is the loss of a loved one. By shaking us loose from our conventional perspective, such an event often makes us realize that some of the goals we have been striving for may not be so important in the end.

We have already discussed the fact that we are conscious of impending death and yet unable to do anything about its inevitability. When Adam and Eve were in the garden, and ate from the apple, they were punished for their increased awareness of the knowledge of good and evil, not only by feelings of embarrassment and modesty but also by being forced to confront their finitude and mutual death. "You were dust and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). Biblical poets from the psalmists to the writer of Ecclesiastes have cried in anguish at man's condemnation to death. The protagonist in Camus' play *Caligula* says, "men die and they are not happy." Cessation of earthly existence is a fact; we cannot change it. No matter how much research is done in nutrition and medicine, no matter what goals we choose for our life, whether we are good, evil, or amoral, the rain falls and we die.* The poets' shouts seem to echo uselessly in a deaf, indifferent universe; God is a God of silence. Because of increased awareness, we realize we are condemned to death. Some existentialists, such as Heidegger, feel that only the dread of death, the lonely *Angst* that results from awareness of our own nothingness, can inspire us to truly create our destiny. A particularly poignant example illustrating our human frailty occurred in a *Playboy* interview with Dustin Hoffman:

*In social learning theory terms, the problem is that death is an inevitable consequence of life. It is interesting to note that many Western and Eastern religions attempt to make death either a positive or an aversive consequence (i.e., concepts of heaven, hell, rebirth, *karma*). Proponents of Judaism and Zen admit that we don't know what occurs after death. The only rebirth they speak of occurs *during* life (see Chapter 4).

Hoffman: I was an attendant, which meant that I went to work every morning at six-thirty or seven and worked all day, eight or nine hours, cleaning up the patients' mess, their excrement, playing Scrabble, cards, ping-pong with them; taking them to hydrotherapy, to workshops, to dances, playing volleyball. I played piano for some of them, like the doctor.

The doctor had been a brilliant pathologist at the hospital, but he had had two or three strokes and had been reduced to less than a child. He had to be fed, changed. His wife was a doctor, too, and every day she would come to visit him at lunchtime. You could see they'd had a terrific marriage. She'd always ask, "Did he eat? How's his appetite?" She never gave up hope. He could talk only in gibberish, like baby talk. "Gegadabadoo?" he'd say. And I'd say back to him, "Vegavegava." And he'd laugh.

But, anyway, I'd play the piano for him. He loved the song "Goodnight Irene." He could almost sing it: "Goo-nigh, Irene, goo." And one day he was sitting on the sofa, singing, and suddenly the door opened and he stopped. It was his wife. And he stood up—he'd never done that before—and rushed toward her, shuffling as best he could, and they met midway in the room, like in a movie. He was crying. I'd never seen him cry before. Crying buckets. And she asked, "What is it?" And he looked at her and there was a moment of such lucidity in his face. And he said, "I can't, I can't, I can't." And I broke down. I quit soon after that. I couldn't do it any more. But I'll never forget that scene. You put it in a movie and nobody would believe it. I might put it in a movie, though, at that. He's dead now, and to be able to make him live again, even in a film, would be nice.⁶

The Mystery

There are those who have an awareness crisis that has no apparent cause. Many who have confronted these feelings have described them in mystical, religious, or existential terms. In Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* the protagonist Roquentin is haunted by an overwhelming awareness that he knows nothing about life. Even the things that do exist for him, such as stones and trees and self, seem to exist without any reason. When this mood is on him Roquentin calls it *nausea*. William James had earlier called it the *ontological sickness*, in which monotonous days come and go, cities look alike, and nothing happens that means anything.

Thus, there are many events which may cause us to be jolted

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from our ordinary activities. The reaction to these events may range from a mild confusion to awkwardness to a painful existential anxiety about our relationship with the universe, and how, in a fundamental sense, we fit into the scheme of things.

The Effects of a Crisis on Our Self-concept

Nowhere are the effects of this crisis—or jolting—more acutely felt than in our concept of ourselves. As long as we feel we are on the “railroad track of existence,” the signals are clear and our self-esteem is based upon predictable indicators of success. However, if our sense of self is built upon external criteria, then it may be quite fragile. We may continually look for a reaffirmation of that self, both from others



and from the material possessions that we have around us.

The Now Society

By WILLIAM HAMILTON



Jack and I are checking all our status symbols.

We may see everything directed at us, threatening our sense of self, and use many types of crutches to build up self-confidence.

CIGARETS MADE ME FEEL SECURE.



BUT I GAVE THEM UP WHEN MY DOCTOR WARNED ME ABOUT LUNG CANCER.



A PIPE MADE ME FEEL MATURE.



BUT I GAVE IT UP WHEN MY DOCTOR WARNED ME ABOUT LIP CANCER.



CIGARS MADE ME FEEL ASSERTIVE.



BUT I GAVE THEM UP WHEN MY DOCTOR WARNED ME ABOUT THROAT CANCER.



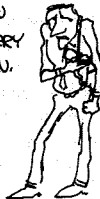
THUMB SUCKING ALLAYED MY ANXIETY.



BUT I GAVE IT UP WHEN MY DENTIST WARNED ME MY TEETH WOULD FALL OUT.



NOW I CARRY A GUN.



As long as our sense of worth is dependent on external criteria—social praise, number of possessions—we will constantly be threatened with losing it. Therefore we may become possessive of our accumulations, competitive over our job positions. The focus may be on building our own sense of identity rather than on sharing ourselves with others.

If our sense of self is dependent upon others, we may be overly swayed by their perceptions, as in the case of the Asch experiment, or willing to unquestioningly follow the orders of authority, as illustrated in the Milgram experiment.* (Refer back to Chapter 2, "The Power of the Environment, Social Environment.")

We may hide behind a self-created image, a *persona* in Jungian terms, a mask that we create and which we present to others. Part of this *persona* may involve basing our identity not on who we are as people, but on our role in society. As long as our sense of identity and positive self-esteem are based only on our work, there will inevitably be a time when we will face a crisis, either through forced or voluntary retirement.

What happens to our sense of self when we are "jolted"?

We may feel, as Heidegger noted, a "non-essence" within ourselves.⁷ We may become confused about our identity, unsure of who we are. As Alice put it in *Alice in Wonderland*,

Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, "Who in the world am I?" Ah, that's the great puzzle.

When external standards break down, and we are left with the feelings of emptiness and nothingness, where do we turn to answer the question of "Who in the world am I?" How do we deal with this time of crisis? What are its implications?

*In the Milgram experiment, individuals followed the orders of a "scientist" even when these orders involved the (seeming) punishment by electrical shock of other individuals. Milgram told his subjects he needed their help in training individuals (who were really the experimenter's confederates) to perfect performances, and that each time the confederate made a mistake, they should be shocked (up to a presumed 450 volt level). Although the confederates shouted for the subjects to stop the shocking, and although the subjects themselves became disturbed at what they were doing, the majority of the subjects continued to administer the shocks. (S. Milgram. *Behavioral Study of Obedience*. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1963 (67) 371-378.)

The Chinese word for crisis consists of two characters. The first character may be translated as "danger," the second as "opportunity." The facing of fundamental questions about our current lifestyle, the realization of the ways in which we have been conditioned and socialized, a feeling of loss of traditional support systems, and the confusion over what comes next may be a frightening experience, a time literally filled with mental and emotional "danger."

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However, a crisis* may also be a time of hope, for we have an opportunity to take responsibility for our lives, to evaluate how we have been conditioned and how we would like to live. We also have the opportunity to develop a new awareness, and to choose and affirm a way of creating ourselves anew. In Chapter 4 we turn to a discussion of these opportunities.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we suggested that we are *not* born free. Rather, we have learned certain ways of acting, certain preferences, and we *believe* that we are freely choosing these preferences. In reality, however, it appears that these choices are merely the result of our prior conditioning. We live in an illusion of freedom. We will continue to live in an illusion of freedom until a crisis jolts us out

*The Chinese word *wei-ji* has no exact English equivalent. "Crisis" may have too many connotations of a deficit, a problem. However, the "turning point" implied in *wei-ji* may also occur at times of growth and positive change.

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of our ordinary habit patterns. Several different types of "crisis" were suggested, ranging from feeling that past goals are no longer meaningful, not being able to obtain society's goals, interpersonal loss, to a sense of the religious and spiritual mystery of existence. When this crisis occurs, it is most acutely felt in our self-concept, and we may be forced to ask fundamental questions about who we are as individuals. This crisis, in addition to being a time of danger and confusion, may also be a time of opportunity: an opportunity to see how we have been conditioned, and to choose a new vision of how we would like to live.