

The Good Society

José Soto¹

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world... Now, Therefore, THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood...

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status...

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person... No one shall be held in slavery or servitude... No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment... Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.²

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)—arguably one of the most beautiful and most promising achievements in the history of humankind.³

It isn't, however, without its critics. Its philosophical foundations, for instance, are notoriously weak. On what do we base this “inherent dignity” of “all members of the human family”? Why are “all human beings... born free and equal in dignity and rights”? How do we know that? What gives us such dignity and rights?

No convincing answer seems to be forthcoming about which we all agree, as we did with the Declaration itself. For those who value the Declaration, this is a serious issue, because it renders this remarkable achievement vulnerable and weak. An obvious sign of this weakness is the fact that the “barbarous acts” that had outraged us (climaxing in the Holocaust), and which led to the

¹ This is the essay version of an online discussion by José Soto: “The Good Society,” Wayfinders, June 12, 2021, <https://www.wayfinders.quest/the-good-society.html>.

² “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights), accessed May 29, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/pages/udhrindex.aspx>.

³ Francesca Klug, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: Rejuvenate or Retire?*, 2018, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=3984>. See also Francesca Klug, *A Magna Carta for All Humanity: Homing in on Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Declaration, have actually continued to this day—for example, in Bangladesh, Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia, El Salvador, Rwanda, Syria, the atrocities of the Islamic State, and now what’s going on in Myanmar and in Xinjiang.

Of course, many don’t believe we even need this Declaration in the first place, or any such agreement. But how, then, will we coexist—never mind thrive—in such a diverse world? What sort of world do we want to leave those who come after us? Given the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in our societies and our world, what would a good society look like? And for those willing to embrace the possibility, what would a good *pluralist* society look like? And on what basis, moreover, does a pluralist society decide on matters on which its members disagree, given diverse philosophical and moral foundations? If “all human beings are born free and equal,” then having enough votes clearly isn’t enough.

Going Deeper

At the heart of these questions is the more foundational question of *the good*: What is, in fact, the good? What leads to flourishing and happiness, both individually and collectively? How do we know when a particular way forward is good and right, or not? And on what basis do we decide and agree on that?

At this time, pluralist societies have diverse visions of the good among their members. And ever since the politico-religious wars in Europe (sixteenth to eighteenth century), strong beliefs like ultimate visions of the good have been relegated to the private sphere and away from the collective imagination, since we saw in those strong beliefs the root cause of all that bloodshed. The good, from then on, was to be defined and pursued by the sovereign individual in the private sphere only.⁴

But how’s that working for us? Perhaps it’s high time we imagined other possibilities for the sake of peace in the world and cohesiveness in our societies.⁵

Freedom and Responsibility

This discussion is part of a module that engages these and other questions regarding the social world. Our task here is simply to pose and frame the questions, to get us thinking and ready to tackle them in succeeding sections. As with the rest of the module, this discussion will engage the social world through the rubric of *freedom* and *responsibility*: the freedoms we humans have

⁴ See, for example, Ken Kersch, *American Political Thought: An Invitation* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2021), p. 227.

⁵ As Michael Sandel puts it, “we need to find our way to a morally more robust public discourse.” Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), p. 30.

to pursue what we consider good and desirable, and the many responsibilities we share to protect and enable those freedoms in any given society.

So, where do we begin? Let us just recognize for now that we all have expectations of one another. We have expectations, for instance, regarding each other's roles in our communities and societies: like expecting the mail carrier to show up with our mail every day, and everybody else to do their part too. When any of us fails to do our part—for whatever reason—others' lives are usually disrupted, their freedom restricted one way or another. Most of us have experienced at least some of that restriction of freedom during this COVID-19 pandemic. And there's been an overwhelming sense of appreciation for each other's roles too. As one billboard put it: "Everyone is essential."

Some of our expectations we enforce by law, of course: like not stealing or breaking traffic rules. Many of our social norms are not enforced by law, but we still expect everyone to respect them: like waiting our turn in line and covering our cough. We establish norms in our homes, communities and societies in order to get along, and to maximize freedom for everyone. So, with freedom come responsibilities for the maintenance of that freedom. That includes accepting certain limits on our freedom by submitting to the rule of law and other social arrangements that protect us all.⁶

It seems reasonable to assume, then, that we normally expect one another to exercise our freedoms responsibly. The question is: What should that look like? And of course, it depends where you're coming from.

Life in the Commons

Many of us believe the aim should be maximizing flourishing *for all*, including the Earth itself: a "common good" where individual freedom is inseparable from a collective freedom that assumes equality. "Liberty and justice for all" right?⁷

Actually, not everyone believes that we all deserve the same level of freedom and access to resources. But in a free society, we're free only to the extent that we don't interfere with the

⁶ Some would even argue that freedom *is* responsibility—they're inseparable. See, for example, Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 423–25; and Bertel Sparks, "Freedom IS Responsibility," Foundation for Economic Education, September 1, 1969, <https://fee.org/articles/freedom-is-responsibility/>.

⁷ This is the ending of The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America: "with liberty and justice for all." By "equality" I mean that given our common humanity we all share the same basic human dignity, and ought to be regarded as such. This basic human dignity then calls for equality of *opportunity*, but not of outcome, since each person's potential depends on his or her lot in life, and on the sort of life they choose to live and what they choose to achieve. But part of our equality, or common humanity, is the sheer reality that any person's lot in life could very well have been otherwise, since we don't get to choose the circumstances or families we're born into.

freedom of others. And many believe that the more we actually protect and *contribute* to the freedom of others—to the common good—the more real and enduring freedom becomes for all involved.

Darren Walker recently explained this in his “Defense of Democratic Values.”⁸ Building on what President Franklin Roosevelt called the “four essential human freedoms” (in his State of the Union Address in 1941),⁹ Walker added four corresponding responsibilities: *With the freedom of speech comes the responsibility to listen, with the freedom of belief the responsibility to accept, with the freedom from want the responsibility to serve, and with freedom from fear the responsibility to act.*¹⁰

For many this is simply common sense at this point in human history, but others are not so sure. And some would like to take over the land precisely to exclude others, their reasons ranging from legitimate concerns like illegal immigration, to more questionable ones like expansionism, nativism, protectionism, and all sorts of animosities that often lead to discrimination, abuse, and even genocide.¹¹

We’ll explore all of these positions and their various reasonings, foundations and motivations as the project develops, including a common tendency among well-meaning individuals called “anti-structuralism”—a real inability to even perceive (let alone accept) the influence of social structures on the wellbeing of individuals, so that the free individual alone is responsible for his

⁸ Darren Walker, “With Four Freedoms, Four Responsibilities,” Ford Foundation, 2018, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/ford-forum/with-four-freedoms-four-responsibilities/>.

⁹ “FDR and the Four Freedoms Speech,” FDR Presidential Library & Museum, accessed February 6, 2021, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms>.

¹⁰ For a profound philosophical argument that finds us responsible for one another by virtue of our dependence on one another, see Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, ed. Hans Fink (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). For progressive political perspectives and proposals, see especially Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019); and Rabbi Michael Lerner, *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019). For a very reasonable proposal that reflects the conservative agenda (broadly speaking), see David L. Bahnsen, *Crisis of Responsibility: Our Cultural Addiction to Blame and How You Can Cure It* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2018). From a psychological perspective, see and Daniel J. Siegel, *The Neurobiology of ‘We’: How Relationships, the Mind, and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. Narrated by the Author. Sounds True Audio Learning Course, 2011. Audible Audio edition, 8 hr., 9 min. And from a Christian perspective, see James Olthuis, *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006).

¹¹ For an important witness to some of these questionable attitudes and positions currently at work in the United States, see George W. Bush, *Out of Many, One: Portraits of America’s Immigrants* (New York: Crown, 2021).

or her fate, without taking into account how social structures and institutions might be supporting or hindering their wellbeing and their pursuit of happiness.¹²

Another important question we'll need to tackle later on is about the compatibility of *competition* with *collaboration*. There has been a surge of advocates for all-things collaborative in recent years. But it would seem that a culture of collaboration would be incompatible with a culture that encourages and runs on competition. Aren't these opposite drives? Can we have both?¹³

Ultimate Questions

Of course, all of this hinges on our values and beliefs. By what standards do we negotiate the gift of life with others? Do we all deserve the same level of freedom and access to resources? And where do we get those values from?

To some extent, such questions need to wait until the part of the curriculum exploring the ultimate order-of-things, including the philosophical and religious foundations of our values and beliefs. In the meantime, the question remains: How do we live well together given our diverse views about what is good and what is right? What are the options? We'll tackle that question by the end of this module.

Next comes an exploration of the nature of culture, which will shed much-needed light on the nature of the social world.

¹² On anti-structuralism (and also “accountable freewill individualism” and “relationalism”), see Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. p. 76ff.

¹³ See, for example, the documentary trailer for “A New Economy,” Domain7 Studios, accessed February 5, 2020, 3:18, <https://vimeo.com/161668374>. To follow up on the content and sources in this documentary, see <http://www.aneweconomy.ca/>.

Bibliography

- Appleby, Joyce. *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Bahnsen, David L. *Crisis of Responsibility: Our Cultural Addiction to Blame and How You Can Cure It*. New York: Post Hill Press, 2018.
- Bush, George W. *Out of Many, One: Portraits of America's Immigrants*. New York: Crown, 2021.
- Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Gosepath, Stefan, "Equality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/equality>.
- Kersch, Ken. *American Political Thought: An Invitation*. Medford, MA: Polity, 2021.
- Klug, Francesca. *A Magna Carta for All Humanity: Homing in on Human Rights*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- . *Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: Rejuvenate or Retire?*, 2018. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=3984>.
- Lerner, Rabbi Michael. *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019.
- Linebaugh, Peter. *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019.
- Logstrup, Knud Eiler. *The Ethical Demand*. Edited by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre. Repr. ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.
- Olthuis, James. *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006.
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. "FDR and the Four Freedoms Speech." FDR Presidential Library & Museum, 1941. <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms>.
- Sandel, Michael J. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.
- Smith, Christian. *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Soto, José. "Intro to Wayfinders." Wayfinders, December 25, 2020. <https://www.wayfinders.quest>.
- The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights). "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Accessed May 29, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/pages/udhrindex.aspx>.
- Walker, Darren. "With Four Freedoms, Four Responsibilities." Ford Foundation, 2018. <https://www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/ford-forum/with-four-freedoms-four-responsibilities/>.