

Appendix 1. Our freedom – our accountability

“Justice is the end of government. It is the end of society.” – James Madison¹

Freedom becomes relevant only in the presence of more than one *thinking*, and hence responsible, human being. **Responsibility is the key to freedom.** Persons or animals that exhibit purely instinctive behaviour cannot be free since they cannot carefully consider and evaluate the options available to them at each step, and choose, after due deliberation and planning, a course of action that they believe is appropriate. If a person with a chemical imbalance in their brains assaults another person, that person may not be acting freely. Similarly, psychiatrically unstable or intellectually challenged people may not be legally liable for their actions and hence cannot be deemed to be free.

The challenge for *two or more* of such *thinking* and *responsible* people cohabiting the universe is for each of them to do what they want to do, while being mindful of the mirror need of others to do what they want to do. The only sustainable way to ensure a reasonable balance among such conflicting demands on freedom is for citizens of a free society to mutually agree to rules for joint living. These rules amount to a ‘Nash equilibrium’,² under which everyone’s liberty is balanced either by arbitrary rules of thumb such as traffic rules, or by precise conditions of justice and accountability. This principle is actually very simple and very ancient: **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”**

As free people we are required to balance the forces of our physical and emotional energy in our interactions with others to make sure that **no one else is made worse off by our actions (or inaction)**. Nothing requires us to go out of the way to help others. We may, of course, choose to do so, but that is not an obligation on us. All freedom calls for is that *we must not ever make others worse off*—for that would diminish their life, even if by a tiny amount. This *accountability* exists whether it is enforced by a nominated third party or not. And yes, when we are called upon to rise and receive the just deserts of our actions, we cannot plead ignorance of the ‘law’ or of our mutually agreed rules as an excuse.

The exercise of our freedom thus requires us to *carefully* consider the consequences of our actions on others. At most times our actions are likely to be perceived differently by different observers, and therefore they will have differential impacts or consequences. We are obliged to be aware of these differential impacts, and to take steps to minimise potential misunderstandings arising from our actions. There is a natural limit or check in place, of course. Were we to hurt others, we know that a retributory cycle could be precipitated, for then these others may attempt to diminish our life similarly. So we are naturally careful not to hurt others even if there is no external government to enforce such accountability.

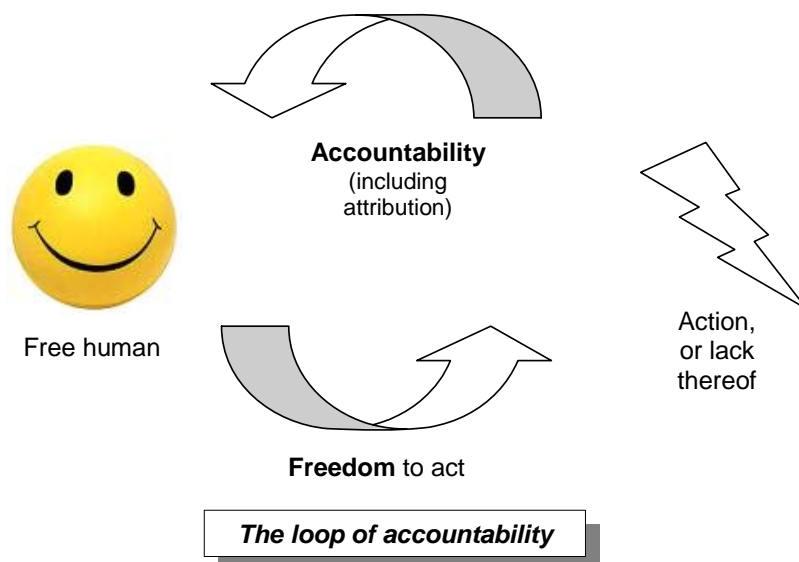
Accountability implicitly includes *attribution*, which is the recognition or acknowledgement of the *ownership* of consequences. Attribution is the arrow that unerringly points to the relevant actor. For example, who is it that is responsible for a particular consequence? Who is it that has won a race? Who is it that owns this piece of land or that, or this piece of bread? We have a firm belief that the runner that runs the fastest should be declared its winner. When the deserts of our actions are not attributed precisely, and outcomes are determined by bias or by chance, we have a sense of disquiet; we object to the diminution of justice that it entails. Such simple and *obvious* things constitute the net import of freedom, which is, in the end, a very trivial and ordinary concept. But nothing is more important than this simple concept.

I am calling this package, namely, *the combination of our free choice and its natural accountability, including its matching attribution, the loop of accountability*. I have also used this phrase in a few places in this book. This concept is best illustrated in the diagram that

¹ In *The Federalist*, February 6, 1788.

² This is a well-understood concept in economics so the reader can refer to standard text books on what this means; I’ll discuss this in more detail in the second volume I’m engaged in writing at present.

follows. Further the Yin-Yang symbol in the beginning of this book can also represent the same concept.



Accountability is the *detailed and precise account* of our actions. The word 'accounts' is used here in its most generic sense, including:

- whether an action was called for and appropriate, namely, the existence and level of responsibility;
- whether the action was duly carried out, ie, the level of an action or inaction;
- what were its consequences; and
- to whom did the consequences apply, namely, the attribution and precise debiting or crediting of outcomes.

The keeping and settling of accounts is also known as **justice**.

Let me illustrate with a very simple example. Let's assume that I walk into a grocery shop and ask for bread from the grocer. The grocer hands me a bread. I pay the grocer and take the bread. That marks the end of a transaction where the loop of accountability has 'closed'. There is no outstanding 'residue' left.

What has happened here? We observe that, being responsible for myself and my family's sustenance, I have *freely*, and of my own volition, stepped into the shop that belongs to someone else. I have then chosen to perform two further actions: to ask for bread, and, second, to receive the bread. Having done that, I have become instantaneously accountable for these actions. I must therefore necessarily perform the next action, namely, to settle the account and pay for the bread. I therefore pay for the bread. Note that exactly at the moment when I finish handing over the money, the ownership of the bread has changed. The bread as well as what I do with it is now attributed to me. The use of the bread is now in my sole discretion. This attribution applies even though the grocer did not write my name on the bread, nor did I register my ownership of the bread with the government.

This simple transaction illustrates the concept of freedom in its entirety. Our free actions are *always* accompanied by an expectation that we close the loop of accountability which is immediately, and *always* generated. No residue should remain. This accounting is as precise as a mathematical equality. Indeed, most of our transactions in a free society are seamless, and the loop of accountability is duly closed. We note that if no one ever violated the loop of accountability, we would never need a government. That would be paradise.