



Menu

Search Articles...

Se:

[Home](#) [About us](#) [Advertise](#) [Worksheets](#) [Archives](#) [Category](#) [Subscribe](#) [E-magazine](#) [Contact Us](#) [Web Exclusives](#)

## The freedom vs. equality conundrum

Prakash Iyer

**Anubhuti:** How can we treat someone who has much less than us as if they are equal to us? I mean I completely understand that we should do that. But somehow our feelings come in the way. He was being patronizing while he shared his lunch with the other boy. Being patronizing is not respectful.

**Ira:** Why? What? Who are you talking about?

**Anubhuti:** One boy had not brought any lunch. He kept looking at his friend who brought some really nice *pulao*. The friend noticed that and asked him to eat from his *dabba*. For some time I saw that they were happily eating, and then I noticed the look on the friend's face. He was looking at the boy with a patronizing air, a smile that said – see how kind and generous I am. I have lunch and you don't have any, and I might feel hungry soon because I have not had a full meal. Even then I am giving this to you...That is what I saw him thinking. His smile started looking like an evil grin to me!

**Ira:** Hey hey... don't be so harsh. Maybe he just realized that he was doing the right thing. Generosity is good by itself. And maybe he felt proud of himself. So what! He did the right thing, that is important. Over time it will become a habit.

**Anubhuti:** But real life is not as simple as that, Ira. Human beings have all kinds of capabilities. Being generous and then expecting something in return – from that boy, or anyone else you were kind to, or from God. This is very common isn't it?

**Ira:** Hmmm yes... human beings are complicated. Especially when it comes to sharing and giving. Sometimes we cannot even stop ourselves from feeling like that, even if we are convinced that we should not feel that. We are talking about one boy, who might develop a habit of not feeling like this. I am wondering how we can think of a society in which everyone is generous and not patronizing. We don't have to be generous only when someone is in difficult situation; we should be so all the time.

**Uttami:** People will say we have money that we have earned through hard work, and we might decide if we want to give it to others or our friends or family, or maybe spend it on something we want. It is about our feelings, not yours. Why do you insist what we should feel and what we should do with our money? You are curbing our freedom. We care about equal distribution, but not at the cost of our freedom.

**Anubhuti:** Aah, I have heard this argument from some of my friends. They say, we have money so we will buy groceries from a supermarket. Why should we buy from the local ramshackle shop? Those who cannot afford a supermarket should buy from there.

Uttami, you are saying this feeling comes from a tension between freedom and equality! Some people value freedom more than equality, others value equality more than freedom. That is more complicated. At least this boy did not think this was a violation of his freedom to eat his lunch himself. Even if he was patronizing or feeling like he was great person, it does not matter. At least he was affected enough by his friend's hunger to share his lunch with him.

**Uttami:** Yes, that is the first step. He is just 10 years old. Hopefully giving and sharing will become a habit for him. And he will stop feeling patronizing. But it is more difficult to convince adults after they have learnt to value freedom over equality.

**Ira:** But how do you argue with the people who are spending more money but giving it to a supermarket chain? I want them to buy from a shopkeeper who needs the money more than the owner of the chain of supermarkets. I am arguing that we should distribute wealth so that there is lesser inequality. They are arguing that they are free to buy wherever they want. I should not control their freedom. How do we even continue the argument?

**Uttami:** This is difficult to argue. People grow up blinded by ideas of quality, discounts and giving credit to people who give a certain kind of good service. We learn to prefer a supermarket over a local shop because in a supermarket we walk through the shop, pick what we want which are in nice sealed plastic packs, and put them in a trolley. We are taught that we get value for our money. Of course the supermarket owners deserve the money because they spend so much on building a big shop, getting the things packed in plastic bags and pay salaries to the staff in the shop. This is hard to argue against.

Archives

- » ► 2022
- » ▼ 2021
  - » December
  - » November
  - » October
  - » September
  - » August
  - » July
  - » June
  - » May
  - » April
  - » March
  - » February
  - » January
- » ► 2020
- » ► 2019
- » ► 2018
- » ► 2017
- » ► 2016
- » ► 2015
- » ► 2014
- » ► 2013
- » ► 2012
- » ► 2011
- » ► 2010
- » ► 2009





Illustration: Sunil Chawdiker

**Anubhuti:** Yes, but Uttami, the small shopkeeper also spends a lot of money on his shop, procuring things from the farmer producers or the wholesale market, puts so much effort in packing rice and dal in newspaper packets. They also get the money that they deserve.

We are not in a society where only government retail shops like the ration shops exist, and no one else is allowed to start shops. That would be a complete violation of freedom. We are just saying, people should choose small shops over supermarkets.

**Uttami:** You're right. In some sense we are arguing for a little less inequality, not complete equality. One supermarket becomes two, then three, then a chain across the city, then the country. That leads to accumulation of so much wealth for one person. That person may be good and kind, they might even donate a lot of wealth and provide for many poor people. So what is wrong in buying from a supermarket then?

**Ira:** I think I see the problem now. We are assuming that the rich person will do good things only, and not do bad things like forcing small shops to close down, or break down houses to build new shops, or buy large houses after cutting down trees. With more money they get so much power. Maybe I should ask my friends to choose the supermarket carefully, and only buy from those that are owned by good people who value some equality.

**Uttami:** You are right. The problem is not supermarket vs. local shops. It is who owns them and what they do with the money they earn... from us customers.

**Anubhuti:** I am not entirely convinced. It is not only the person. It is the power they get from their money. We cannot assume that rich people will do good things with their money. Sometimes wealth makes people care less for others. The problem is the inequality in the distribution of money in society. That leads to inequality in distribution of power. Power is not a bad thing in itself, but what you do with power is important.

**Uttami:** Ha ha ha...we seem to be going in circles now. We are back to the same point we started with.

**Anubhuti:** We are back to the same problem that bothered me – the look in the eye of the boy who shared his lunch. That feeling is what we need to think of and worry as teachers. As teachers it is our responsibility to teach children the moral side of things. If you have more than you need, it is your duty to know that everything we own has other people's contribution too. You are free to decide what you want to do with the extra money that is yours now, or in the case of my student extra *pulao*, but you should learn to care for others also.

**Ira:** You are talking about learning to care for others and valuing your freedom at the same time. Caring for others needs treating others as equals – and giving to them when you feel you have more. Or you have what they need. This will only come from doing this again and again and making it a habit.

**Uttami:** It is not merely a habit, Ira. We should learn to see ourselves as a community of people, not as many free individuals. Then we care for the community more than ourselves as individuals. Not that we do not care about our freedom. We should see our freedom and our wealth as a result of being part of a community.

In a local shop we are paying for all the effort that a supermarket invests, but we are caring for someone who is part of the local community. We know the person, his family, we see them as part of our community. If a supermarket is run by a local person we would buy from them. There is nothing wrong in that.

My problem is that a supermarket is impersonal. Process controls human beings. They insist on smiling. A young man keeps following me almost waiting for me to ask for his help or even insisting on helping me, because he is being paid for that. Poor guy! I feel sad for him. Imagine being paid to be kind to others.

On the other hand, in the local shop, the kindness is based on friendship. Yesterday I was in a hurry, and needed to buy biscuits for my son. I rushed into the local shop, picked a pack of biscuits and rushed out saying, "I shall give the money tomorrow!" The lady in the shop just smiled and said, "Yes, yes. You go carefully," and continued to talk to the other person who was buying something.

That is the kind of community feeling I am talking about. We need to teach our children this.



**Anubhuti:** Yes! I agree. I was planning to talk to the boy who shared his lunch about that smile, but I am not going to. What happened was good. This kind of care will happen through experiences which we have to gently guide them into. Now if I give him a lecture on his smile, it is me who will be patronizing. Then he will give me a lecture on the same thing.

**Reference**

“Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty” by G.A.Cohen

The author teaches Philosophy of Education at Azim Premji University. He can be reached at [prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in](mailto:prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in).

 *Cogitations, October 2021*

---

### Leave a Reply

Logged in as 21-07-20-012701. [Log out?](#)

Comment

Post Comment

---

### Contact

Teacher Plus  
A15, Vikrampuri  
Secunderabad  
Telangana 500 009  
India

[Subscribe](#)

**Teacherplus**

Copyright. All rights reserved. **Designed By Ochre media Pvt Ltd**

