

Self-regulated Freedom

In history, societies that felt virtuous because they were democratic, sometimes let the “will of the people” overwhelm what we might consider the “rights of the people” because they had not bothered to enumerate them. As a reaction to a populace in which democracies have gotten out of hand (e.g. the majority votes away the rights of the minority), tyranny often arises simply to put things in a manageable order again. In contemporary times, we fear tyranny far more than democracy, so we ignore democracy’s excesses. Even though our constitutional democratic republic has theoretically given us example of what Plato might have called “the right kind of freedom”, we tend to ignore the middle ground and pay attention either to tyranny or democracy.

Plato wrote that the greatest threat to democracy was, ironically, freedom. By this he meant freedom “of the wrong kind”, licentiousness, for example. He preferred a generic freedom in which one sets one’s own code of limitations and lives by it. In the contemporary west, where there was no official theocracy, one’s private religion can help citizens set their own code and live by it. Those who prefer to have no religion almost always adopt a personal code to live by in order to regulate their own freedom.

It occurred to me that a martial arts analogy might be that we want people to react in self-defense with complete freedom, but must train them with complete tyranny, at least at first. The transition from a strict, rules-oriented training to mastery of free application traverses an important middle ground of which we are often unaware. I call this middle-ground **Self-regulated Freedom** with a begrudging nod to Plato’s *Republic* (which is, in my opinion, too pie-in-the-sky and too authoritarian to be helpful in managing a society in the real world).

If we were to defend ourselves with complete freedom (analogous to a “licentious” self-defense response), we would probably not only overreact, but also apply inappropriate movements to the situation at hand. Unregulated freedom is often inefficient and sometimes ineffective. Conversely, if we were completely programmed by rigid training, we would probably react with a response that was ingrained, but not necessarily appropriate. There may be a time for an all-out, wild and crazy response, just as, in a society, there may be a time for a war in which the reasonable ethics of peacetime are set aside; however, just as we do not want to live in a society that has no other choice beside all-out war, we do not want to have only the choice of undisciplined wild-and-wooly “freedom” as our only self-defense response.

That is why a good martial arts school gradually gives its students more freedom as they become more advanced. Because they have had a strict upbringing and have proven to exhibit self-control in their development, they can be trusted not to react with unregulated freedom when

self-defense is needed. The strict upbringing, gradually giving way to more freedom in which a student exhibits self-control, has a middle ground: *self*-regulated freedom.

The philosophy of the art, the style, or the dojo, serving in the same capacity as religion often serves in a non-theocratic society, helps students set their own code and live by it. As in society, the student/citizen decides to what extent that philosophy will influence his actions and to what extent self-regulation should be mollified and still serve as personal protection.

Certainly, self-regulation has its flaws and those who wish to be more licentious can easily take advantage of it, but self-regulation certainly beats martial tyranny or martial anarchy almost every time.