



FREEDOM, RESPONSIBILITY, AND LAW

When people live together, everyone needs to live up to certain expectations. Some expectations are informal, such as the unwritten rules that govern a family. Some expectations are formal, such as the written laws that govern a community.

It is easy to see how having rules can restrict the freedom of an individual to do what he or she wants. What is more difficult to understand is how these rules often also provide freedom to all individuals.

As an example, consider how laws and regulations governing public sanitation affect personal freedom. Bans on littering and organized garbage collection dictate acceptable methods for waste disposal. Therefore, these laws restrict the freedom of citizens to do what they want with their garbage.

But these laws also maintain order for society. With a universal framework to minimize pollution, citizens are free from the burden of many pollution-borne diseases. As well, a public system of garbage disposal frees citizens to spend their time and energy pursuing other life choices rather than individually seeking out ways to dispose of their garbage. Therefore, these laws can be seen as contributing to freedom.

This simple example demonstrates how a law can simultaneously restrict and enhance freedom.

A similar example of how laws both restrict and enhance freedom is found in the failing effort to build shelters on the island:

Two shelters were in position, but shaky. This one was a ruin.

"And they keep running off. You remember the meeting? How everyone was going to work hard until the shelters were finished?"

"Except me and my hunters—"

"Except the hunters. Well, the littluns are—"

He gesticulated, sought for a word.

"They're hopeless. The older ones aren't much better. D'you see? All day I've been working with Simon. No one else. They're off bathing, or eating, or playing." (p. 55)

Building huts restricts the boys' freedom to bathe, eat, and play. However, much like how public sanitation laws expand freedom, shelter will protect the boys from the excessive rain, heat, and sun. Thus, they are freed from many risks that will arise due to exposure to the elements. And it is important to keep in mind that the boys collectively and freely decided to build these huts.

FREEDOM REQUIRES RESPONSIBILITY

Eleanor Roosevelt once said that "Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility. For the person who is unwilling to grow up, the person who does not want to carry his own weight, this is a frightening prospect."

The boys on the island are free to meet and decide that huts are a priority for their civilization. But if they are free to decide they will build huts, as citizens of the island they are also responsible for seeing through their decision. This would show their respect for their own process of government, as well as help their whole society remain orderly, healthy, and safe.

What is suggested by the boys simply running off to play is a civilization practising their freedoms, but not exercising their responsibilities.

CONSIDER

1. Who is responsible for the failure in hut construction? The boys or their leaders?
2. What are the risks for those who practice their freedoms but do not exercise their responsibilities?

FOR FUTURE READING

It could be argued that the boys have too much freedom and not enough respect for the group's collective decision-making process. As the story progresses, watch for how the boys create and follow rules.