

The Limits of 'My Body, My Choice'

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At a protest against vaccine mandates, a hospital worker told New York's Livingston County [newspaper](#): "If you want it? Great. If you don't? Great." She continued: "Choice is where we stand. If you want it, we're not against it. That's your choice." Those I know who have refused to get vaccinated or wear masks have echoed this same idea. They assure me that they aren't telling anyone else what to do but that this is a matter of personal choice. They are doing what they think is best for themselves and their families.

"My body, my choice," the rallying cry of the pro-choice movement, has been adopted by those opposing mask and vaccine mandates. People who are pro-choice have voiced outrage that their phrase is being co-opted, which in turn thrills those on the right who are using it.

In Vogue, Molly Jong-Fast [said](#) that the phrase, when used by conservatives who oppose vaccine mandates, shows that "for Republicans, it's a case of government regulation for thee but not for me." Of course, critics [would accuse](#) her of the same hypocrisy for being pro-choice but also favoring vaccine mandates.

Certainly, the complexities of abortion and Covid prevention are different. These are not identical issues. But the mutual slogan points to an underlying agreement between these warring factions: They both understand liberty primarily as the absence of restraint.

This is how Americans in general tend to envision freedom. It's what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called negative liberty — the autonomy of individuals to do what they want to do. Personal choice is therefore the essential quality of liberty.

Americans deeply value this freedom. In a 2014 essay for The New Republic, Mark Lilla [wrote](#) that the dogma that unites Americans from right to left, unifying "civil liberties absolutists, human rights crusaders, neoliberal growth evangelists, rogue hackers, gun fanatics, porn manufacturers, and Chicago School economists" is this: "give individuals maximum freedom in every aspect of their lives and all will be well."

Obviously, there's merit in this notion of freedom. As it developed historically and spread, it has spurred essential social reforms like women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery. But as we look at the pandemic, it's evident how insufficient "personal choice" is in promoting the common good.

The truth is that our personal choices, particularly those that are difficult and cost us something, are often not merely rooted in what we think is right *for us*, but in what we think is just and good in an absolute sense. For everyone. Personal choice then cannot be our only way of assessing whether something is ethical or just in a society.

Christian ethics call people to ideas of freedom that are not primarily understood as the absence of restraint, but instead as the ability to live well, justly and righteously. In Galatians, after an extended meditation on liberation, Paul says: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use

your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Freedom, for him, had a purpose and end, a "telos." We are freed not to do whatever we feel is best for us individually, but instead to love our neighbors.

We therefore have obligations to others, even obligations that we do not willingly choose. Our personal preferences and maximal autonomy must be set aside for the sake of loving our neighbor and for the common good.

It's rarely admitted aloud but asking someone to seek the good of others is often a call to suffering in one degree or another. When pro-lifers ask a mother to carry a baby to term, they are asking her to take up inconvenience, sorrow, financial strain and pain on behalf of another.

Over the past year as we've asked people to go into lockdown, cancel their travel plans or family gatherings, close or curtail their retail businesses, wear masks and get vaccinated, we are asking them to assume some level of financial and personal risk for the greater good — for strangers, for the elderly, for the immunocompromised, for the medical community. We can and should enact legislation like paid family leave, no-cost health care and other measures to [support mothers](#), just as we support economic relief for those affected by Covid prevention. But we cannot deny that even if we seek to lessen the load, we are asking people to bear a burden.

How do you call a society committed to personal freedom and happiness to bear the burdens of others? Most of us intuitively grasp that there's more to life than living for oneself and one's own happiness or comfort. But we lack a positive vision for the purpose of individual liberty.

Thomas Aquinas, a medieval Catholic theologian, gave us the gorgeous and helpful phrase "arduous good." "An arduous good is a good that requires struggle," Ron Belgau [wrote](#) in a 2013 article for First Things, "a good that is worth fighting for. And a good that inspires fear and hope and endurance in the face of adversity. 'Arduous good' is also a phrase that is seldom spoken in Hollywood, and almost never heard on Madison Avenue. In that silence, the poverty of our culture is laid bare."

Consumer capitalism is not going to teach us about how to pursue arduous goods, nor is technological progress, nor is either American political party. Theoretically, religious communities are places that train us toward ends other than individual autonomy. They point us to something bigger and higher than ourselves, calling us to love God and our neighbors. However, this is unfortunately not always the case. Many religious communities have lost their ability to articulate an alternative to the sovereignty of personal choice and individual autonomy.

Christian churches have often imbibed the same overarching commitment to personal choice. The dogma of maximal individual freedom often trumps whatever other dogmas we may confess each Sunday.

But as a culture, we desperately need religious communities that do not parrot the predictable ethical arguments of the right or the left. We need a rooted and robust call to love our neighbors, our families and the marginalized, the needy, the weak and the afflicted among us. Individual liberty is not a bad political starting point, but it's inadequate to orient our lives. We need other stories that teach us how to live justly and wisely in the world, that lend us a vision of positive liberty, that show us what freedom is for.