

FREEDOM
(SEBASTIAN JUNGER)

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This slim book, a companion of sorts to Sebastian Junger's earlier book *Tribe*, is about philosophy derived from life. Junger has made a career out of undergoing risks and hardships, then distilling his experience to insight based in reality. It doesn't really work here, though; *Freedom* is too unfocused. It's quite interesting in spots, but rambles and jumps around, even more than Junger's earlier offerings. If you're going to get anything substantial out of this book, you'll have to do the heavy lifting yourself.

Junger never makes any real attempt to define freedom, which is probably smart, given the path of abstraction on which that would take the book. He wants the reader to view freedom as an emergent property, something that reveals itself through his combination of anecdote and history. Certainly, there is very little new to say about the definition of freedom that has not been said. Let's take the question of freedom from a different angle, though. What should be the goal of humans having freedom, however we choose to define it? The flourishing of our kind, naturally. If something named "freedom" leads to the opposite, what is the point? Nothing. If we first realize this, Junger's book helps us advance our thought.

The author examines the effect when life strips away many of the encrustations and obfuscations of our modern ideological and technological civilization. His frame is himself, along with a handful of other men, walking four hundred miles along railroad tracks in central Pennsylvania. They haven't abandoned civilization—they stop in small towns and buy food, for example. But by modern standards, they are not under the thumb of anyone. "[M]ost nights we were the only people in the world who knew where we were. There are many definitions of freedom but surely that is one of them." This rambling journey is not meant as a test of manhood—all these men had already proven that in combat—but as a very partial and very temporary retreat from civilization, to rediscover what that implies for a man.

By the way, I found the description of travelling on railroad rights-of-way of technical interest to me for practical reasons—because I'm

an apocalyptic paranoid, I already know that railroads have a purpose unrelated to trains, of which Junger took advantage. Thus, a few years past, I used to work some days a hundred miles from home. I carried a detailed railroad map (which are surprisingly difficult to find), figuring that the rails would be a much easier and safer way to return home on foot, in some kind of societal catastrophe, than using the roads. Junger confirms this; not only are railroads easy to traverse (most have walkable maintenance roads running along them, though walking on the ties themselves he says is difficult), they are usually completely free of people, in part because it's illegal to walk on or along them. So if you ever find yourself needing to move around in the apocalypse, there you go, you've gotten a hot tip.

Also interesting, I think, is that *Freedom* is profoundly subversive of today's verities; the coded seditious nature of this book probably accounts for the mixed and confused reception it has received among the cognoscenti. Most of all, this is a book about and for men. If you are a purple-haired "feminist" or ludicrous "gender non-binary," your head will explode if you read this book, because Junger implicitly rejects that men and women are or can be the same, or change their essential selves. In fact, although the writing style is entirely different, *Freedom* has more than a little in common with *Bronze Age Mindset*, even though I am sure Junger would resist that parallel. It has, or should have, the same audience—Junger is in his fifties, but it's not men his age to whom this book really should appeal, or matter. After all, most men in their fifties today who might buy this book are locked into the professional-managerial elite, with rising waistlines and falling testosterone, and absent some societal catastrophe, they will never get out of that trap. Rather, young men should read this book, because they are all sold a siren song that promises freedom, but they still have options. They are told, just get a college degree, check the right boxes, ensure you curb and bridle your masculinity, obtain a BS job in the professional-managerial elite, and then you too can lead a life of unlimited license, consumerism, and atomization. Never mind you will have no meaning in your life and die alone. If a young person reads this book, he might get off this destructive track, and he will at least know there is another way to look at life.

The core of man's freedom for Junger is, as the first part of the book is titled, the ability to "Run." You are not free if you cannot leave where

you are and go somewhere else. As he relates, this was how much of Pennsylvania was settled—by men and their families moving west, up the rivers and past the rapids, risking gruesome deaths at the hands of Indians. Junger follows their path, without the same dangers, to be sure. When you run, though, you do not obtain the atomized, abstract freedom so cherished by the modern world. “The inside joke about freedom is that you’re always trading obedience to one thing for obedience to another.” Outside of the comforts of civilization, reality must be obeyed, as well as one’s obligations to the group, and almost everyone has a group. No matter how far you run, unless you leave society altogether, you owe something to others, and this is not tyranny, but in fact the nature of freedom.

Junger’s historical and factual lessons are often obscure and therefore particularly interesting, at least to me. He contrasts the defeat in the early sixteenth century of the Pueblo Indians, settled town dwellers, with the inability of Europeans to defeat the Apache, nomadic warriors, for hundreds of years. He points out that, especially in heat, human beings can cover long distances on foot better than any animal. This is a physical area in which women perform at up to eighty percent of men’s performance, as opposed to the normal fifty percent or so, making societal nomadism possible, by not requiring sexual differentiation during travel, unlike fighting and childcare, which are biologically dictated to be performed by men and women respectively. This ability to literally run has made many people and groups free—American settlers; American slaves; nomads throughout history.

But let’s ask, does running lead to human flourishing? Temporary running, followed by settling, is different than a permanent life of movement, and temporary running certainly can lead to freedom from oppression. Those permanently on the move, nomads and hunter-gatherers, may be happier than those settled, but their lives are riskier. Or are they? It’s not clear, really. Many, like James C. Scott in *Against the Grain*, would argue that hunter-gatherers are happier, and healthier. And a risky life can be a flourishing life, too—as we have seen during the Wuhan Plague, excessive reduction of risk is extremely destructive of human societies. In practice, those given a choice often choose running. As Junger discusses at greater length in *Tribe*, history shows many examples of members of settled society fleeing to join nomads,

including quite a few American settlers joining Indian tribes by choice. You won't get civilization that way, nor glory, but you may get much more satisfied people. Regardless, certainly, our civilization today has neither glory nor satisfaction, which suggests that what freedom we have is not to our benefit.

The other two parts of the book are titled "Fight" and "Think." I'm honestly not sure why. Really, both parts are about fighting, as is much of the first part. That may not be surprising—Junger made his name writing books about fighting, either nature (*The Perfect Storm*) or man (*War*; and his documentaries about our endless war in Afghanistan). His point seems to be, though it's implicit, that fighting is inherent in freedom. Not just against direct threats, which exist in all human times and places, but more broadly, in order to live as one chooses in one's own society, within the strictures that society necessarily imposes. He goes on at considerable length about the Irish Easter Rising of 1916, which, by sheer coincidence, also occupies an important place in a different book I was simultaneously reading, Carl Schmitt's *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Junger's point seems to be that freedom isn't free, though as with all potentially controversial thoughts in this book, he never makes it explicit.

Thus, the theme of Europeans fighting Indians permeates this book, with no detail spared and not hiding the extreme brutality of Indian warfare, on both sides, and the constant warfare among the Indians themselves (the Iroquois and their allies had, shortly before the white man arrived, exterminated most of the other Indian tribes in this area). On the frontier, everyone had to be prepared to fight. In all human societies and times before modern times, refusing to fight meant slavery. What is more, choosing to fight against great odds often led to success, either quickly, if the attackers found the cost of conquering not to their liking, or over time, as the initially-bearable cost mounted for the attackers—and here Junger returns to the mobility that is inherent in freedom as a tool of war, used by those in Afghanistan and Iraq defending their lands against invading Americans; "Western troops struggle to corner and defeat even lightly armed insurgents."

But again, it's not entirely clear what Junger's point is. He doesn't seem to making any comment on the divisions in America today, although in one of the more evocative metaphors he uses, he muses

about a massive freight train barreling through the night, what “would it take to stop something like that instantaneously? I imagined some kind of massive wall, but the answer was more obvious: another train going just as fast in the opposite direction. America could seem like that as well, a country moving so fast and with so much weight that only a head-on collision with itself could make it stop.”

Junger seems to think that stopping would be bad. He doesn't say what he thinks of today's America. Although here he carefully takes no political positions, his own real-life politics skew left (he recently wrote an astoundingly ignorant article on the Spanish Civil War for what remains of *Time* magazine, an article that appears based mostly on Communist propaganda fed to him by his father, the point of which is that Americans who won't unhesitatingly and completely comply with all Left demands are very, very bad people). Yet he also recognizes, not being actually dumb at all, that “At the heart of most stable governments is a willingness to share power with people you disagree with—and may even hate.” But as is indisputable, every modern ideological civil war in the West has been caused by the inherent inability of the Left to do precisely this, and we see the exact same pattern nearly completely formed in America today (and it would have been completed had Trump been recognized as the winner of the 2020 election). We have seen the future because we have seen the past. So when Junger says, repeatedly, that every man must earn his freedom, I doubt if he's thought about what that means for the oppressed majority of Americans today, even as he talks at length about the Easter Rising. With freedom, he says, comes responsibility—including the responsibility to do what is necessary to maintain that freedom, for oneself and one's children. He doesn't follow that thought down the logical rabbit hole.

So back to freedom and human flourishing. This is, despite its interest to philosophers, really not a complicated question, and it is even more simple for us, given the stark choice we face. The entire power system of the West today tells us, and thus propagandized, we often tell ourselves, that we are free, because we have unlimited license to be slaves to our unreasoning passions. But that was, for thousands of years, not the definition of freedom, but the definition of slavery, because every man knew such license led to the opposite of flourishing.

Worse, we only have such license, which at least feels good as we load ourselves with chains, only so long as we do not dare to suggest, much less place, any limit on our fellow citizens choosing slavery. The evil Siamese twins of our federal government and the Lords of Tech, both having penetration into our lives completely unprecedented in human history, ensure compliance. At every turn, what we are allowed to do, what we are allowed to say, and increasingly what we are allowed to think, is minutely examined, categorized, and allowed or disallowed. We are caught in a net, and it is being tightened around us, and yet we reflexively call it freedom, even as it strangles us.

We should remind ourselves that real freedom, the freedom that leads to human flourishing, is that brought by William Tell, hero of Swiss independence, to his people. (In fact, I think reading Ernst Jünger's *The Forest Passage*, which discusses Tell and freedom, or for that matter my own thoughts on Tell in reviewing the children's book *The Apple and the Arrow*, more profitable than reading this book.) Tell was embedded in his society; he was not atomized and separated from civilization as was Junger's small group of men on the rails. Even more importantly, he took far greater risks. He brought true freedom to his community by resisting Habsburg tyranny. Tell defeated tyranny not only by refusing to bow to a hat, the short version of the story usually actually remembered, but by then starting a rebellion, beginning by assassinating the Habsburg representative. There is a crucial lesson here.

Heroism and freedom are closely linked. In very many human times and places, heroism such as that of Tell is necessary to achieve freedom—the freedom not of license, but ordered freedom, the freedom to choose rightly, to the benefit of oneself and one's people. Yes, our ruling classes have completely lost this conception of freedom, and Junger only seems vaguely aware of it, though it is implied in the realities he describes. That doesn't mean we can't adopt it ourselves, and through heroic action, the specifics of which are difficult to foresee, restore it society-wide.