

ILI Maggie Nelson Chapter 2

In the book 'On Freedom', Maggie Nelson engages with the question of freedom in four realms (art, sex, drugs, and climate), making an urgent intervention amid cancel culture and the MeToo movement. In Chapter 2 on sex, she draws on Foucault and uses the concept of power and desire, to shed new light on calling out people for professional sexual misconduct, exposing the paradox of freedom.

Nelson says that freedom is a part of power. There is only power if there is freedom. Otherwise, there is total domination. When we are within power, we are not aware because we do not reflect on it. Awareness of power is the sign of freedom – in other words, freedom lies in our awareness of power. We can only place or imagine ourselves in a position of power when we have some kind of freedom. The awareness of the power is the evidence of some kind of freedom.

Freedom – the room for maneuvering – is paramount to experiment. And experiments come with harm and damage. Freedom is not that we know what we want, not that we come out unharmed. There are lots of consequences that we cannot predict. She is pushing the definition of freedom far by saying that we are free even when we are constrained, even when we do not know what we want. It seems that she is proposing an expansive definition of freedom.

Nelson reflects on the MeToo movement and the law that it brought. They demand there needs to be explicit consent for sexual activities, but she says that it is so hard to define consensual sex when we do not know ourselves what or when we desire – which is more often the case than we think.

Who we choose as our partner is often an unconscious choice informed by unconscious/subconscious factors - then how 'autonomous' are we really? When a lot of things we do are unconscious, how can we be autonomous? There is also a difference between having desires and acting on them. When it comes to 'thorny issues', such as AIDS, sex between parties with power differentials, and disclosure of STD status, people may have certain fantasies/desires and our freedom to experiment with them, but also when/where we want this experimentation to stop. We may have desires but do not practice them – are we then unfree? Wanting is different from desiring because wanting takes into account practicalities and risks, and balancing all that.

A fine line and a delicate balance need to be sought when people desire what is self-destructive. For instance, masochist sexual behaviors. When it goes so far, there becomes a need to protect them from themselves. Determining how far it can go is difficult. People who are involved in masochist sexual acts set up clear rules and even draft contracts clearly outlining what can and cannot happen during the encounter. When do we need to protect them from themselves? The question is poignant in particular when they are children, people with disabilities, and those who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Nelson also questions the idea that the MeToo movement seems to have created: that 'correct' or 'ethical' sex is where power relations are stripped as much as possible. Assuming that freedom is always diminished where there is a power relation. Following Foucault's idea, she claims that there is power everywhere. And agency is a negotiation of possibilities and power. But, we may ask ourselves, the question of whether our romantic partnerships are free from power dynamics. Even between partners intimacy is influenced by power dynamics in society, for example gender roles enacting during sex.

The freedom to speak out limits the freedom to experiment – because it compels us to conform our behaviors to what is considered correct. So in this sense, the MeToo movement is denying people's freedom by punishing desires that do not conform to the norms that it has created – what is 'correct' or 'ethical' sex.

People are ambivalent about their responsibility so they tend to shift the responsibility to the other person but it is problematic ... because sex is 'the scene of learning'. She says that we should have the freedom to experiment. But then we should also accept that experiment comes with pain - but there are boundaries, which are very hard to define. There are many 'thorny issues' – where there grey areas are. As the white house intern who had sexual relationship with the president said, 'But it is complicated. Very very complicated.' In these grey areas, is there a need to set a

rule? We can set a rule/law and see what happens. Laws standardize/generalize – but when they are applied, it is also judged on a case-by-case basis.

Nelson also questions the ideology that tells us that we become happy when we are completely free. For instance, in a newspaper, there was a story of a man who grew up with hippy/gypsy parents - 'free' parents. When he was 14 for instance, he flew to India himself to stay with his parents' friend who was doing drugs. He reflected on his childhood and he thought that it was a mistake of his parents not to set any boundaries. The consequence of not setting boundaries was perhaps feeling unsafe, insecure, of not having a home, of being loved. Setting boundaries can be an act of care and love.

Giving complete freedom/being in a completely free environment may not be ideal. Law – a boundary that the state makes – can limit our freedom but also provide us with freedom. It is also the question of 'Freedom to' and 'Freedom from', as well as 'whose freedom?'. For instance, think of the law to punish/control parents who abuse children – it limits parents' freedom to hit their children, but it provides children with freedom from being hit. It is about equality/freedom vs the protective function of the state. In the end, it is a delicate balance between freedom and equality.