



What Are Freedoms For?

John H. Garvey

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We generally suppose that it is our right to freedom which allows us to make the choices that shape our lives. The right to have an abortion is called "freedom of choice" because, it is said, a woman should be free to choose between giving birth and not doing so. Freedom of speech protects us whether we want to salute the flag or burn it. There is a correlative principle: one choice is as good as another. Freedom is not a right that makes moral judgments. It lets us do what we want.

John Garvey disputes both propositions. We should understand freedom, he maintains, as a right to act, not a right to choose; and furthermore, we should view freedom as a right to engage in actions that are good and valuable. This may seem obvious, but it inverts a central principle of liberalism--the idea that the right is prior to the good. Thus friendship is a good thing; and one reason the Constitution protects freedom of association is that it gives us the space to form friendships.

This book casts doubt on the idea that freedoms are bilateral rights that allow us to make contradictory choices: to speak or remain silent, to believe in God or to disbelieve, to abort or to give birth to a child. Garvey argues that the goodness of childbearing does not entail the goodness of abortion; and if freedom follows from the good, then freedom to do the first does not entail the freedom to do the second. Each action must have its own justification. Garvey holds that if the law is to protect freedoms, it is permissible--indeed it is necessary--to make judgments about the goodness and badness of actions.

The author's keen insights into important rights issues, communicated with verve and a variety of both real and hypothetical cases, will be of interest to all who care about the meaning of freedoms.

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