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# Pursuing Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt

Rita A Gardiner, *The University of Western Ontario*

## PURSUING FREEDOM: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND HANNAH ARENDT

## BUSCANDO A LIBERDADE: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR E HANNAH ARENDT

Rita Ann Gardiner\*

### ABSTRACT

How do we judge what is right while, at the same time, respect the freedom of others? In considering this question, I bring Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt into dialogue to better understand how the pursuit of freedom necessitates a willingness to judge others. In my discussion, I explore how these writers treat the themes of ambiguity, oppression, and revolution. By comparing how they relate these themes to freedom, we see how liberty is interconnected with personal accountability, and a willingness to question our beliefs. It is when we are unwilling to engage in an ongoing dialogue, I argue, that we risk losing that which is most precious to us, namely, freedom. I begin by examining Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* to see how she connects ambiguity with ethical action. Then, I consider how ethical action is sometimes obscured by self-centered desires, which bar us from thinking about how our actions may negate the freedom of others. Next, I look at their different approaches to questions of freedom as it relates to eradicating oppression. Finally, I examine the ways in which Beauvoir and Arendt show that the pursuit of freedom requires us to take a personal stance against injustice in order to respect the dignity of others. In so doing, we engage in an ethical relationship with the world.

KEYWORDS: Beauvoir; Arendt; freedom; judgment; oppression

### RESUMO

Como julgar o que é correto enquanto, ao mesmo tempo, respeitamos a liberdade de outrem? Ao considerar essa questão, estabeleço um diálogo entre Simone de Beauvoir e Hannah Arendt para melhor entender como a busca pela liberdade necessita de uma disposição para julgar outrem. Em minha discussão, exploro o modo como essas escritoras tratam os temas da ambiguidade, da opressão e da revolução. Comparando de que forma elas relacionam esses temas à liberdade, vemos como a liberdade está interligada à responsabilidade pessoal e à disposição para questionar nossas crenças. Defendo que é quando

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\*Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research; Western University, Canada. Email: [rgardi@uwo.ca](mailto:rgardi@uwo.ca)

estamos indispostos a nos engajar em um diálogo contínuo que arriscamos perder aquilo que nos é mais precioso, a saber, a liberdade. Início o artigo examinando a obra *Por Uma Moral da Ambiguidade*, de Beauvoir, para descobrir como ela liga ambiguidade à ação ética. Em seguida, considero como a ação ética é algumas vezes obscurecida por desejos egoístas, que nos impedem de pensar o quanto nossas ações podem negar a liberdade de outrem. Posteriormente, analiso as diferentes abordagens dadas pelas autoras das questões de liberdade como relacionadas à erradicação da opressão. Finalmente, examino os modos como Beauvoir e Arendt mostram que a busca pela liberdade requer que assumamos um ponto de vista pessoal contra a injustiça a fim de respeitar a dignidade de outrem. Ao fazê-lo, engajamo-nos em uma relação ética com o mundo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Beauvoir; Arendt; liberdade; julgamento; opressão

## INTRODUCTION

How do we judge what is right while, at the same time, respect the freedom of others? In considering this question, I bring Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt into dialogue to better understand how the pursuit of freedom necessitates a willingness to judge others. In my discussion, I explore how these writers treat the themes of ambiguity, oppression, and revolution. By comparing how they relate these themes to freedom, we see how liberty is interconnected with personal accountability, and a willingness to question our beliefs. It is when we are unwilling to engage in an ongoing dialogue, I argue, that we risk losing that which is most precious to us, namely, freedom. I begin by examining Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* to see how she connects ambiguity with ethical action. Then, I consider how ethical action is sometimes obscured by self-centered desires, which bar us from thinking about how our actions may negate the freedom of others. Next, I look at their different approaches to questions of freedom as it relates to eradicating oppression. Finally, I examine the ways in which Beauvoir and Arendt show that the pursuit of freedom requires us to take a personal stance against injustice in order to respect the dignity of others. In so doing, we engage in an ethical relationship with the world.

## FREEDOM AS AMBIGUITY

Beauvoir opens *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by arguing that the knowledge of our mortality marks the “tragic ambivalence” of the human condition, and provides us with a paradox (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 7). That is, we must find a meaningful way of escaping the knowledge of death, while knowing that we can never escape finitude. This, she argues, is the fundamental ambiguity of human existence. But rather than viewing the ambiguity of life as negative, Beauvoir contends that we should embrace uncertainty, because when we realize that doubt is a fundamental aspect of existence, we will be better able to create the life we wish to lead. And this, she suggests, is where Existentialism can be of assistance since it offers an ethical approach to the human condition, and a response to the question of ambiguity, which is anchored in our situated, intersubjective, embodied reality.

Despite claims to the contrary, Beauvoir argues that Existentialism is not a solipsistic approach, because it posits that the individual is defined first and foremost in relationship with others. In her opinion, it is precisely because of the intersubjective nature of human existence that we are able, if we choose, to realise freedom in a just manner (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 73). The pursuit of freedom involves an active engagement with the world and others. The way that we demonstrate our engagement is through our concern for one another. Thus, personal freedom brings with it an ethical responsibility for others. What this means is that in pursuing our particular projects, we must not act in a way that negates the liberty of others. Hence, we must continually think about how our actions may negatively affect others. Yet oftentimes, she argues, we chose not to do so. For some people, this is because they become too dogmatic; for others, it is through an excess of idealism. These ways of being illustrate how we are uncomfortable with ambiguity. We prefer to cling to faith, or ideology, because it seems to offer us stability. Such a desire for stability, according to Beauvoir, moves us away from freedom toward an abstract notion of human existence. Such abstraction can mean we lose sight of the meaning of freedom, which is always to be understood as situated and relational. It is via abstraction but through acknowledging “the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 9).

Yet there may be times when we honestly believe that we are acting justly, but this may not be the case. For instance, some North Americans, want a healthier, sustainable diet, and have started to eat quinoa, because it is supposed to be good for our overall well-being. Indeed, the United Nations wants us to celebrate 2013 as the international year of quinoa. However, there may be problems with such a celebration. It appears that by importing this food stuff from another part of the world, we may inadvertently impact the lives of farmers, and their families, who are the producers of this food stuff. For thousands of years, quinoa was a mainstay of the diet of many Andean families. In recent times, however, because of consumer demand from the West, quinoa has become too expensive for the average person in Bolivia to buy (*Guardian*, January 25, 2013). Instead, they have to purchase less healthy goods such as rice and pasta. Moreover, the cost of quinoa in Peru's capital, Lima, is now more expensive than the price of chicken. What was once a simple, nutritious grain is now only affordable for the rich. Thus, what began as a desire for healthier food has ended up negatively affect people in other countries whose living depends upon this grain. What this example shows is that we must constantly question how what our actions affects the lives of others. But this takes time and effort, perhaps more than the average consumer is willing to invest. Nonetheless, if we do not remain alert to how seemingly inconsequential actions have a detrimental impact on others, we are acting unjustly.

## **THE PROBLEM WITH TYPECASTING**

This is why we need to cognizant of the myriad ways in which social injustice occurs, and its negative impact on freedom. This requires that we pay attention to what we are doing. In thinking about social oppression, Beauvoir suggests that because “man’s project toward freedom is embodied in certain acts of behavior,” we may be able to describe which behaviours lead us toward, or away from, freedom (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 78). In her consideration of particular types, Beauvoir maintains that each “type” manifests a set of behaviors that can lead toward injustice and are, therefore, contrary to the pursuit of freedom. One of the types she discusses is that of the serious individual who, Beauvoir maintains, is willing to sacrifice others in pursuit of a goal. Such behaviour is dangerous

because it can lead to an attitude whereby people are perceived as objects. As an example, Beauvoir considers the actions of the colonial administrator who, in choosing to complete a highway project, fails to care about the welfare of the workers. The workers' suffering is irrelevant to the success of the imperial enterprise. All that matters is the successful completion of the goal. Through this illustration, Beauvoir shows us how a means-ends way of thinking, not only exhibits a lack of judgement, but how such action is unethical because of the refusal to care about the lives of others (BEAUVOIR, 1948).

Beauvoir connects this lack of care to how some people regard certainty, rather than ambiguity, as the *raison d'être* of life. Too serious an approach to life may lead us to become fixated on the rightness of our point of view, be it in the guise of religion, ideology or work. In extreme cases, this desire for certainty can lead to tyranny. At other times, the serious individual turns into what Beauvoir calls the "sub-man," who takes "refuge in the ready-made values of the serious world" (BEAUVOIR 1948, p. 44). The "sub-man" is willing to carry out violent acts in return for being offered a sense of control. To ward off fears of death, the "sub-man" commits meaningless acts of violence as a way of avoiding the ambiguity of existence. I will return to the issue of violence later on.

Beauvoir then argues that it is our ethical responsibility to take up the challenge of freedom by remaining steadfast toward our projects. At first glance it may seem that someone who remains steadfast to his or her projects is an adventurer (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 58-61). However, the adventurer's love of conquest, and desire for fame, means that they are willing to sacrifice others for personal glory. Thus, the adventurer treats people instrumentally. Furthermore, because the adventurer lives in the moment, it may seem as if the adventurer is the epitome of the existential hero. Not so, states Beauvoir, because the adventurer is indifferent to the justness of their cause. As a result of this indifference, the adventurer refuses to consider how their actions adversely affect others. And in this respect at least, the adventurer is no different as the serious individual.

Through examining these types, Beauvoir provides concrete examples of how certain behaviour is anathema to good judgement, and the pursuit of freedom. Her detailed descriptions show how people forego genuine freedom for a particular project, ideology or passion that is all-consuming. Yet, for Arendt, Beauvoir's typology is problematic. What typecasting does is to place people into categories, which in itself is an unjust act since we

are always more than any category would suggest. When we start to talk about people's behaviour, we fail to acknowledge their uniqueness. The element of uniqueness is critical to understanding Arendt's approach to the subject of freedom. For Arendt, a person's uniqueness derives, not only from their social location, but also from the sum total of their experiences. So even though describing types of behavior may seem constructive, such typecasting ignores the unique qualities of each individual. For Arendt, notions of equality must be tempered by recognition of difference if we are to realize a more equitable social fabric.

What is critical to creating a just world, from an Arendtian perspective, is for each person to have the ability to speak and act in the public realm. The "right to have rights," is critical to her notion of freedom, and the eradication of injustice (BIRMINGHAM, 2006, p. 1). Indeed, Arendt regards the erosion of the political, understood as the space of freedom, to be a result of modernity's fixation with equality while, at the same time, denying difference. In celebrating the rights of abstract man over the concrete situation of everyday life, it becomes too easy for oppressive regimes to take away the rights of some groups. When this happens not only do those who suffer lose their political rights, they also lose a sense of belonging to the world. Arendt sees huge problems with the notion that people have to assimilate to the dominant social order, because assimilation means that we forego a sense of who we are. This can be catastrophic because without a strong anchor to the world, we lose not only our sense of perspective, but our desire to pursue freedom. This is why we must understand how the diverse conditions of oppression affect why people choose, or refuse, to take up the mantle of freedom.

## **FREEDOM AND OPPRESSION**

While Arendt and Beauvoir have different approaches, nevertheless, what links them is their insistence that personal freedom is not about the self, but rather about our engagement with the world and others. What defines oppression, for Beauvoir, is when people are unable to transcend their circumstances. This is why she regards it as essential that we do not conceive of freedom in an abstract way, but consider the concrete conditions that cause oppression. It is our ethical imperative to will the freedom for others by striving

to eradicate injustice, as Beauvoir states “the cause of freedom is not that of others more than it is mine: it is universally human” (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 48). Oppression reveals itself as a defensive attitude designed to put self interest above a concern for others. She pursues the theme of gender constraints in *The Second Sex*, and argues that freedom is at odds with such social structures as marriage and the family. Conservative family values, in particular, work to restrict the liberty of women, especially when women are taught to put the needs of the family before any thought of self. This is not a healthy way of living, according to Beauvoir, for it encourages women to view the world through the myopic lens of the private sphere and, as such, is detrimental to freedom for others. If we want to advance the cause of freedom, we must examine how gender, and other forms of exploitation, is socially constructed and maintained. In exposing injustice, we can try to change a way of being that serves to limit the transcendence of some, while at the same time, enabling that of others.

One cannot build a free society without trying to comprehend the ways in which oppression limits freedom. Another way in which oppression magnifies itself is through the activity of dictators, especially when they present themselves as defenders of the glorious past (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 92-95). One example of this “curatorial attitude” is the Portuguese dictator, Salazar, who chose to spend his country’s limited resources on erecting official monuments to celebrate Portugal’s glorious history. While these buildings were being erected, the Portuguese people were starving, and medicine was in short supply. As well, in encouraging the celebration of festivals and the wearing of traditional costumes, he refused to open new schools. In so doing, Salazar ignored the present in favour of reinstating a mythical version of the past. But such antiquated celebrations are meaningless as no-one cares for the “past in its living truth if he insists on preserving its hardened and mummified forms” (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 94). In Salazar’s dream of a glorious past, he sacrificed the present lives of the Portuguese people.

Beauvoir argues that if leaders, like Salazar, cared for their people, they would acknowledge that freedom necessitates getting rid of oppression. But this would mean that tyrants gave up their privileged existence. Rather than doing so, tyrants encourage their followers to believe that each life is worth less than the community as a whole. This degradation of individual existence makes it easier for these regimes to scapegoat particular



groups of people, who become the personification of everything that is wrong with society. This way of thinking, and acting, serves to nullify freedom.

In realizing freedom, we must question whether our actions are working for or against the freedom of others. It is only through an ongoing questioning of our intentions that, Beauvoir argues, we can guard against becoming too idealistic or conversely too dogmatic. But oppressive regimes try to suffocate contesting viewpoints. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt makes a similar argument when she maintains that totalitarian regimes are based on the dictator's need for absolute control. This need for control differs from tyrants of the past who, she argues, were content to let others take the blame when things went wrong. In modernity, this desire for control manifests itself in the way that totalitarian leaders such as Hitler wanted to take personal responsibility for every act committed in his name. In so doing, Arendt contends that Hitler was correct when he argued that without him there would be no Nazi Germany (ARENDR, 1966). Furthermore, this need for absolute control shows itself in a twisted way of thinking about equality. That is, everyone is equal and, thus, expendable, with the exception of the leader. Hence, totalitarian leaders turn notions of equality upside down by stressing how only there is only one man who is unique – that is, themselves, whereas everyone else is the same and, thus, expendable.

## **REVOLUTION AND FREEDOM**

Many people in desiring freedom have fought to relinquish the chains of oppression. However, when we look back at history, we see that some revolutionaries failed to take the next step, that is, to try and actualize freedom in the creation of a just system. For Arendt, liberty and freedom are not the same since it does not necessarily follow that liberty will lead to freedom, even when that was its aim (ARENDR, 1963, p. 22). While liberation is a condition of freedom, nonetheless, Arendt argues, it is not everything. In the past, the oppressed have often fought for liberty in the past through coups d'états or palace revolts but what was different in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the “the eagerness to liberate and to build a new house where freedom can dwell is unprecedented and unequalled in all prior history” (ARENDR, 1963, p. 28). Revolution must not stop at the point when we liberate ourselves

from tyranny, but go one step further so as to create a structure flexible enough to allow for human flourishing. Freedom from oppression must be followed by the creation of a just political system.

Without the creation of a politically robust realm, Arendt maintains that “freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance” (ARENDR, 1963, p. 149). Hence, if revolutions are to be successful, she argues, they must connect freedom to the foundation of new laws or covenants between people. This is one reason Arendt was positively inclined toward the American Revolution, for she regards the acts of the Founding Fathers as continuing the promises made by the Pilgrim Fathers on the Mayflower 150 years' earlier who were willing to put their faith in one other. Arendt's admiration for the founding of America is because she believes that it is built upon political plurality, especially the public discussions that took place in town hall meetings during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. These different public forums served to enable people to make their views known to one another, and aided, not just political engagement, but the spirit of freedom.

Yet, sometimes, revolutionaries abandon the cause of freedom in response to the urgent demands of life. This is Arendt's main problem with the French Revolution which, she argues, put the concerns life before political freedom. But in trying to realize Rousseau's notion of one will in the founding of the French Republic, the will of the people was transformed into the resolve of the ruling tyrant, Robespierre. The people demanded freedom from their abject poverty, yet Arendt argues, that it was because Robespierre put compassion, rather than freedom, at the core of the revolutionary platform that what started out so admirably deteriorated so badly. What began as a quest for virtue turned into a hunt for hypocrisy, which he saw everywhere and in everyone. In trying to ferret out the negative aspects of society, Robespierre ended up eradicating, not just his political opponents, such as the Girondists, but anyone who he thought might be against him.

Freedom is part of the world, not an aspect of the self, which is why Arendt argues that Rousseau was in error when he argued that freedom is the same as free will (ARENDR, 1963, p. 75-86). Any republic that tries to forge a society on the basis of a sovereign will is negating plurality, which is necessary for freedom to flourish. We see this in the way that those organs of the Republic that were truly political spaces of appearances, such as the numerous societies that emerged as a result of the revolutionary call for freedom, were

destroyed because their plural way of operating was seen to be anathema to the demands of the sovereign state. Whenever there is a republic based on one will, rather than a multitude of opinions, the concept of freedom will be eradicated. In order to be free, therefore, men must renounce sovereignty and embrace ambiguity as a fundamental aspect of human existence.

Without voices of dissent we cannot envisage a society that allows a space of liberty to flourish. For Arendt, an authentic space of freedom arises as a result of the activities of a group of people working toward a common goal (ARENDR, 1958, p. 200). This is not a community of equals, but rather an antagonistic arena where people feel free to speak and act as they chose, while keeping the welfare of others in mind. She was fond of reciting a line from the French poet, René Char, who wrote that “our inheritance was left to us by no testament” (ARENDR, 1968, p. 1). The lack of inheritance Char speaks of refers to the fact that, in times of moral crisis, there are no ethical recipes. This is why it is so important to judge for ourselves. Char reflects upon his experiences working with other members of the French resistance and their fight against the German occupiers, and their collaborative government. In their resistance to the occupation, these men and women acted in a genuine struggle for freedom. Together, they created a “public space between themselves where freedom could appear” (ARENDR 1968, p. 4).

But victory in wartime brought a bittersweet aftermath, and Char laments the loss of their shared “treasure.” In their pursuit of freedom, these Resistance fighters were involved in an authentic enterprise that enabled them to act on their principles. This enabled these men and women to be honest with each other, and create a space of openness; this is the genuine moment of freedom for Arendt. In her opinion, it is only in times of radical change that we can envision the path to freedom. While Beauvoir also celebrates the activities of the French resistance, she describes how certain intellectuals chose to maintain a neutral attitude when the Germans invaded France. It appears that many of these thinkers took up “the point of view of history” in order to stay aloof from the dangerous realities of occupied France (BEAUVOIR 1948, p. 76). In choosing neutrality, these intellectuals acted immorally, in her opinion, since they played into the hands of their oppressors. By putting their own comfort, and security, over the safety of others, they acted contrary to the demands of freedom and, in doing so, exhibited poor judgement.

## JUDGEMENT AND FREEDOM

But how do we judge what is right in circumstances of political crisis? One answer to this question is that we base our judgments on the inner dialogue we have with ourselves which Arendt referred to as the “two in one.” This Socratic inner speech enables us to judge whether or not our actions are in keeping with our principles. When we judge this indeed the case, then we can act, not in the knowledge we have all the answers, but in the realization that we our actions allow us to live in peace with ourselves. In order to do so, we have to be willing to judge each situation accordingly. Of course, the action we take may turn out not be the right one in hindsight. Nevertheless, when we act in a way that is in keeping with our principles, and ensure that we take into account the concerns of others, we do the best we can.

Beauvoir and Arendt view the act of judgement as part of our ethical responsibility if we care about freedom. We must refuse to act if we think our actions may cause suffering to others (BEAUVOIR, 1948, p. 138). However, there may be times when we must make difficult decisions as, for example, when the rights of freedom in general contradict the ongoing liberty of some. In her coverage of the trial of the fascist intellectual Robert Brasillach, Beauvoir argues that he used his journalistic platform as a way to cause harm to Jewish people (MARSO, 2012). In his newspaper columns, Brasillach published the location of places where Jewish families were hiding and, hence, knowingly signed their death warrant. In Beauvoir’s opinion, Brasillach treated the Jewish people with contempt seeing them as no more than things; what mattered was his belief in a cause, in this case, Nazism. While she thought that the French government was wrong to put him to death for treason, Beauvoir refused to sign a petition advocating clemency, as other writers such as Albert Camus had done, because she felt that it would be like spitting into the faces of his victims. It was because of Brasillach’s inhumanity, rather than his treason toward France, that Beauvoir judged that the death penalty was the right decision.

Here it may seem that Beauvoir is contradicting her own philosophy, because we saw earlier that existentialist ethics posit the view that the freedom of one man should not cause harm the liberty of another. But there will be times when moral acts of violence are justified if it means a greater evil will be stopped. In her discussion of violence, Beauvoir

reveals some of the difficulties of making judgments (HUTCHINGS 2007, p. 112). We see that Beauvoir was willing to condone violence in certain circumstances. The resort to violence may be justified when it means stopping a regime from committing atrocious acts, as in the case of the Nazis. Thus, while it may not be ethical to commit violence, it may, in certain instances, be necessary. This issue is especially difficult in moments of crisis when there is little time to think through the pros and cons of an action. Thus, all we can do is act in accordance with our principles, which means that we must be need to be willing to think, and judge for ourselves.

This kind of reasoning is similar to that adopted by Arendt in her assessment of Adolf Eichmann (ARENDR, 1963), where she argues that it is our moral responsibility to judge him. In a world of contingency, it is crucial that each person is held accountable. Otherwise, concepts like guilt and innocence are meaningless. In refusing to be held accountable for his actions, Eichmann showed his contempt for the rights of others. In Arendt's opinion, his defense that he was merely obeying the law of the land was an erroneous one. It was Eichmann's ethical responsibility to question how his actions could negatively affect others. But he chose not to question his orders and acted in a thoughtless manner. Instead of thinking about what he was doing, Eichmann chose to do what he was told. Those who choose not to query their actions, and think for themselves, as in the case of Eichmann, make an active choice to cause human suffering. Thus, he exhibits the qualities of the "sub man," that Beauvoir thought so dangerous to others (MORGAN, 2009, p. 50).

It is because of Eichmann's lack of feeling toward the suffering of the Jewish people, but also for humanity as a whole, that Arendt argues his execution was just. With the publication of her book on Eichmann and her phrase "the banality of evil," Arendt launched a major controversy. This was further heightened by the fact she had accused some members of the Jewish leadership of behaving less than honorably. Many critics disagreed with her assessment, arguing that it was wrong to be judgmental, since each one of us might have been morally culpable under the same circumstances. But she insists that judging is crucial to an ethical worldview (ARENDR, 2003, p. 19). Moral judgments are necessary because without judging, our world alters without us noticing, and this may prove calamitous for us all.

## CONCLUSION

In this comparison of Beauvoir and Arendt's approaches, I have concentrated on their different approaches to the pursuit of freedom, and its connection to judgement. Both writers argue that the realization of freedom is intrinsically related to each person's willingness to judge for herself. Through her analysis of diverse forms of injustice, Beauvoir describes concrete instances in which people negate freedom by focusing on their own desires at the expense of others. Her concrete analysis of the different ways that oppression shows up in the social world may offers insights that Arendt, because of her focus on the political realm as the only space of freedom, misses. However, Arendt rightly cautions that a focus on particular types of behavior may overlook the unique qualities of each individual. Where I see these thinkers in concert is in their emphasis that a willingness to stand up for our beliefs is crucial to the pursuit of freedom. Thus, the act of judging is part of our ethical responsibility if we care about the freedom of others. By being prepared to take a personal stance, and judge for ourselves, we are actively engaging in the world. In doing so, we promote the cause of freedom, and the dignity of the human spirit.

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