

On Boxing and Liberty

SHOULD a sport as brutal as boxing be allowed to exist in civilized society? Is a ban on boxing an excessive restraint of individual freedom? We perhaps could all agree that there should exist a certain minimal area of personal freedom that must not be violated or else the individual will be so confined that he is unable to develop his individuality even to the slightest degree. This means that a boundary or frontier must be defined between private life and public authority. The debate is on where that line should be drawn.¹

**See also pp 2451, 2475,
2482, and 2483.**

John Stuart Mill wrote in his essay, "On Liberty," that there was only one circumstance under which society was entitled to use physical force, legal penalties, or moral coercion. He wrote:

That the only principle that is the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others to do so would be wiser or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him or visiting him with any evil in case he did otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to someone else. . . .

But neither one person, nor any number of persons, is warranted in saying to another human creature of ripe years that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it.²

Why was Mill so rigid on drawing the line on public authority only at the point of self-protection? Certainly he understood that men are interdependent and that no one is so completely isolated as not to ever obstruct the lives of others in any way. Liberty for the pike is death for the minnows.³

Isaiah Berlin reasoned in his "Four Essays on Liberty" that none of us is truly free because we are slaves to our passions and our habits, if not to another man. Besides our habits and pleasures, we also tend to pursue long-range goals of a higher level because we believe them to be for our best. Such goals might vary from honesty and charity to a set of religious beliefs. Often we extend these beliefs to something wider than ourselves, perhaps to our family, our tribe, our church, our country, or even to the rest of

From the Division of Neurosurgery, Department of Surgery, The New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, New York.

Reprint requests to the Division of Neurosurgery, Department of Surgery, The New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, 525 E 68th St, New York, NY 10021 (Dr Patterson).

mankind. If our children or our friends seem unwilling to assume our beliefs as their own, we try to educate them, argue with them, or otherwise convert them. We believe them to be blind or ignorant. If only they understood themselves as we understand them, they would not resist. The use of logic and education to alter the ideas of others, we would all accept, still leaves the individual free to make the final decision for himself.³

However, it is but a small step to reason that because others fail to understand their own best interests and because they are not as rational and wise as we are, it is our duty to coerce them for their own sake and not for our own self-interest. If they understood their own inner spirit they would no longer resist. It is only their hidden inner self that we take into account. We are now in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or society and to bully, or to oppress, or to torture them in the name and on behalf of their hidden, real self.

Therefore, the concept of liberty or freedom changes from a freedom that an individual actually feels he wishes and needs to a freedom buried within the individual and not dreamed of by his empirical self. This kind of freedom is then easily translated into some superpersonal entity, a state or a class or a nation or even to the march of history. The lessons of the last 50 years show us that this issue is more than academic.³

Kant wrote that "no one can tell me to be happy in his own way." Paternalism is the greatest despot imaginable. This is so because it is to treat men as if they were not free but human material for one man, the "benevolent protector," to mold in accordance with his own purpose. This manipulation of men to propel them toward goals that only the social reformer sees and they do not is to deny them their human essence, to treat them as objects without wills of their own, and therefore to degrade them. To drive men toward a goal not conceived by them, even if it is for their own benefit, is in effect to treat them as subhuman, to behave as if their ends are less sacred than one's own. It is not enough to say that it is in the name of some value higher than themselves, because as Kant pointed out all values are the creation of men and consequently there is no value higher than the individual. All forms of tampering with human beings, shaping them against their will, all thought control denies them their freedom and deprives them of their most basic right.³

Boxing lasted 1,000 years at the time of the Greek and Roman empires, when Western Civilization as we know it was thriving. It ended in about 400 AD, probably because it had become thoroughly corrupt and professionalized and also because it was banned by a Christian emperor who had a dislike for heathen spectacles. The Greek temple to Zeus at Olympia was razed, the magnificent statue of Zeus was moved to Constantinople, and Christianity became dominant. Western Civilization entered the Dark Ages. Man's spirits soared again during the Italian Renaissance, and again boxing briefly flowered. But society became more restrictive, boxing and also learning disappeared, and the Renaissance faded. In the first part of the 18th century, with the industrial revolution and the rise of individual freedom, boxing again began to flourish. Art and science flowered during the first part of the 20th century, and boxing prospered as well.

The association between man's highest intellectual accomplishments and boxing is no accident as I see it. Arts, letters, and science only thrive in a time when the government and the church remove the hobbles from individual creativity. If the government becomes an arbiter of moral standards and personal safety, it does so at the price of individual freedom, whether the curbs are on boxing or on the scholar. How much better to educate, cajole, inform, entreat, then let the individual make his own decision. I personally have great concerns about any restriction of an individual and his freedom. The banning of boxing could be looked on as telling boxers that their desires and their values do not count. They are not competent to decide for themselves, and the choice is better left in the hands of other individuals who are more educated and know better what they need. This modest tyranny, to me, is an early sign of repressive authority. I am against it.

RUSSEL H. PATTERSON, JR, MD

1. Areen J, King PA, Goldberg S, et al: *Law, Science and Medicine*. Mineola, NY, The Foundation Press Inc, 1984, pp 356-365.
2. Mill JS: On liberty, in *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*. New York, EP Dutton & Co, 1947, pp 65-170.
3. Berlin I: Four essays on liberty, in *Two Concepts of Liberty*. London, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp 118-172.

Making Boxing Safer

The Swedish Model

BOXING is a dangerous sport. There is always a risk of brain damage. Professional boxing has been banned in Sweden since 1969. Medical supervision of amateur boxing is very strict and now well accepted. Special rules and restrictions to protect the boxer's health have now been practiced for more than ten years. As a consequence of this, there have been fewer knockouts (last season only 1%) and no brain damage has been detected.

There are 136 boxing clubs in Sweden with 1,080 active boxers. Only five currently active boxers have had more than 100 matches. No boxer is more than 30 years old, and none has been knocked out more than twice.

**See also pp 2451, 2475,
2481, and 2483.**

No actual boxing is allowed before the age of 15 years. Between 10 and 15 years of age, only technical training is permitted. In competition, points are counted for different technical details. In this age range, a boxer cannot "win" a match, but he can get a "diploma" for good technique. If hard blows are struck against the rules, the referee will warn the boxer and give a reduction of points. If it happens again, he will disqualify him. This kind of "diploma boxing" not only protects the young brain, it also leads to cleaner, more technical boxing in the long run.

Boxers younger than 19 years can neither win nor lose by knockout. These junior matches are always settled by

points. If a boxer is knocked out, he is forced to rest without fighting for at least one month. Before he fights again, he has to go through a neurological examination. If he suffers a second knockout, the resting time will be at least three months. The ring physician can also order a boxer to rest after an extremely hard match with many blows to the head.

Every boxer in Sweden must have a "startbook" from his first fight. It contains the boxer's photograph, name, address, and club. Rules, medical regulations, and instructions about "how to care for health" appear. Initial medical examination findings and a record of every match are entered, including opponent, result, any knockouts, and the doctor's notes.

Only after a special "control committee" checks the books every year is the boxer allowed to continue for another season. Every boxer who has had more than 100 matches is seen by a neurologist for examination and electroencephalography. The same applies to boxers who wish to continue to fight after the age of 30 years.

Each boxer has one major medical examination each year. This includes tests of fitness, vision, and hearing and a neurological examination.

Before every match, the ring physician connected with the weighing-in ceremony examines the boxer for heart rate (and, if necessary, temperature), inspects the eyes, throat, and hands, and auscultates the heart and lungs. In tournaments, the boxers that have more than one fight are also examined neurologically between the matches for pupil reaction, finger-nose and finger-finger coordination, diadochokinesis, and strength in the hands and are given the Romberg test with eyes shut. After each fight, the ring physician has a look at the boxer, especially if there are any injuries or knockouts.

The ring physician must always be at ringside to help the referee in case of injuries. If a referee does not show enough care for a boxer's health (for instance, allowing too many punches to the head), the ring doctor can report him to the boxing federation.

Every year there are courses at the high school of sports to educate referees, boxing leaders, and trainers in medical questions. In alternate years there is a two-day course for registered ring physicians.

All injuries, including knockouts and decisions in which the referee stopped the bout, are registered, reported to the boxing federation, and published every year.

Continuous study by the international medical press concerning boxing and our own research is important. We are beginning a project to study 20 young boxers prospectively, who will be compared with 20 soccer players and 20 cross-country runners. We will follow them up annually with computed tomographic, electroencephalographic, creatine kinase BB, and psychomotor tests and neurological examinations.

A physician for the boxing federation has a difficult position. He must have the boxer's confidence and the boxing federation's support to make his decisions. To protect his integrity, it is of great importance to have strict rules and regulations in the medical supervision of boxing.

ROBERT LUDWIG, MD
Huddinge, Sweden

Reprints not available.