

## THE FAIRNESS FALLACY

Individual action means that we individually define not only who we are, what we believe, and why we believe it, but also how we choose to interact with others. It is a part of our foundational “free will.” We have the liberty to be generous and to be charitable toward others, and we have the liberty to be selfish and greedy. Having this freedom of choice may well create some temporary inequities, but over time, individual responsibility coupled with the challenging presence of other authentic and well-defined individuals tends to even the playing field.

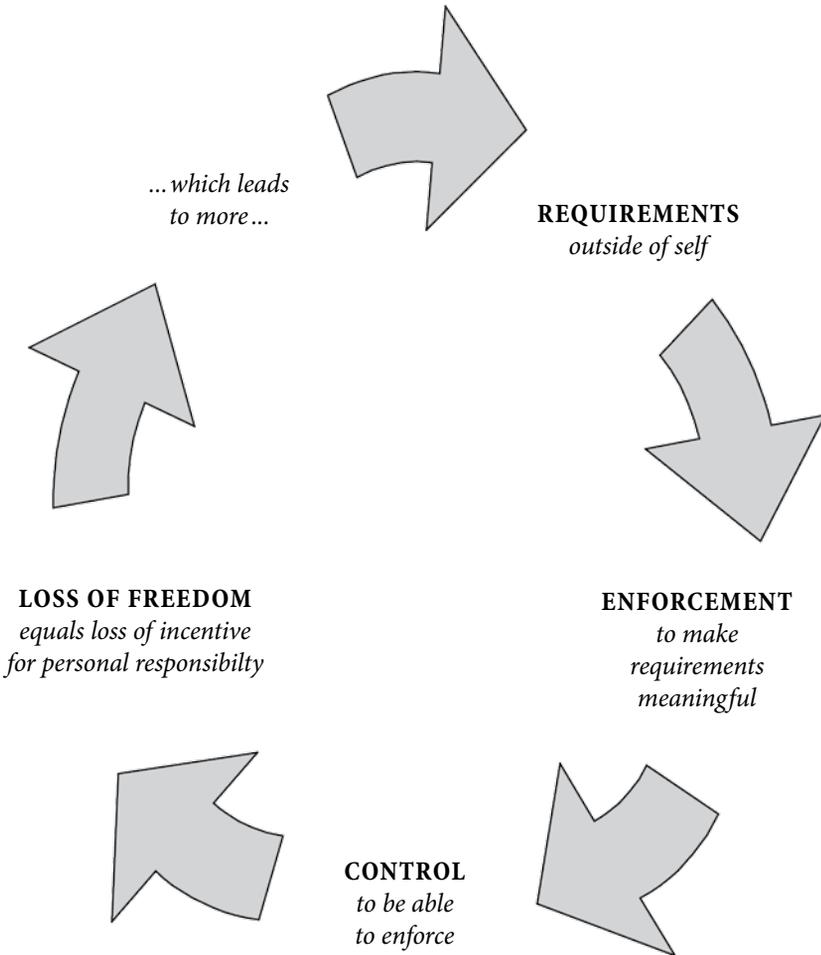
When outsiders try to regulate “fairness,” they typically ensure failure at some level because their outside regulation comes at the expense of individuality and liberty. If something is “required” (by

parents, employer, or government) it must be enforced, or else it has no meaning. If it is enforced, then the enforcer must be willing to assume control over the one being enforced. Control over another equals a loss of individual liberty, because control is a zero-sum game; for one person to have it means another person must not. But it is more than that. When that liberty is lost, so too is the incentive for personal responsibility. After all, the goal now is compliance with a rule, as opposed to good decision-making associated with the fact that I will be responsible for living with the results of my actions.

And yet, some things must be required, enforced, and controlled, and there is a broad consensus that some individual liberty must be surrendered for the common good. For instance, we surrender our liberty to drive at whatever speed we desire; government at various levels requires we drive no faster than their posted limit, enforces it with law officers, and is in control of that aspect of our lives. Strong debates ensue—and should—when government at various levels seeks to extend such control to requiring individuals to have health insurance, or to drive cars that achieve a specific miles-per-gallon level, because intuitively, freedom-loving individuals know requirements must be enforced, control must be assumed to make the enforcement work, and control by one equals a loss of control by another. I will leave debates on specific regulations up to the political pundits; it is the principle that concerns me. Regulation must be applied at some level by parents, employers, and government, but it should be absolutely no more than is necessary so that individuals are free to choose, to succeed and fail, and to own the consequences of their individual actions.

All liberty—and all failure—is individual. We arrive at the fullest benefit of both through individual decision-making and consequences, not by one-size-fits-all rules designed to make life “fair.”

## The Vicious Cycle of Enforced Fairness



We must resist our own anxiety about temporary setbacks in order to allow failure and its growth-producing response to challenge to take hold and bring more stability to the situation. Strength built in response to challenge is a powerful force.

As is so often the case, C.S. Lewis understood the fairness fallacy well:

The teacher is able to form the letters for the child because the teacher is grown-up and knows how to write. That, of course, makes it easier for the teacher; and only because it is easier for him can he help the child. If it rejected him because it's easy for grown-ups and waited to learn writing from another child who could not write itself (and so had no "unfair" advantage), it would not get on very quickly. If I am drowning in a rapid river, a man who still has one foot on the bank may give me a hand, which saves my life. Ought I to shout back (between my gasps) "No, it's not fair! You have an advantage! You're keeping one foot on the bank?" That advantage—call it "unfair" if you like—is the only reason why he can be of any use to me. To what will you look for help if you will not look to that which is stronger than yourself?<sup>73</sup>

Individual liberty gives us the freedom to choose our thoughts, beliefs, and actions, and we gain strength by making responsible choices. Of course, the problem comes when fallible human beings choose poorly, or fail to choose and thus adapt toward weakness by their inaction. At that point, pressure builds to "do something" to enforce a more collective "fairness." But we must consider carefully the alternative. If individual freedom is continuously given away to accomplish something more "fair" (always as defined by someone other than individuals), then the very freedom of individuals becomes threatened. Whether you lean more to the left or right politically, surely on this we can all agree: If government is allowed to be stronger than the individuals who consent to be governed, the individual will cease to have the very right or ability to consent.

We like making our own decisions. As a society we must, however, accept a greater degree of responsibility for our own decisions if we don't want them to be dictated and controlled by others. That means a higher level of tolerance for the principles of successful failure that lead us from its initial pain, through perseverance, to a more developed character, and finally to genuine hope.