

CANTERBURY TALES

Harris

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The *Canterbury Tales* were written six hundred years ago, long before the United States came into being. Chaucer never heard of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or a country anywhere in the world without slavery.

So, one of the challenges of the *CT* is to divest ourselves of our own modern preconceptions in order to objectively appreciate Chaucer's work. (We don't have to like it, but we do have to try to be as objective as possible.) One benefit of such divestment is that it puts our own preconceptions into sharper focus. We can then examine our preconceptions more accurately. Here are some of the more unexamined preconceptions among readers of the *CT*.¹ You will find that unless you think carefully about them now, you risk construing a sloppy thesis for your essays at the end of the semester.

FREEDOM. What do you think freedom means?

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin observed two types of freedom: negative liberty and positive liberty. **Negative liberty** means freedom *from* ... from control, from obligation, from responsibility. In this way, someone with no parental control is free. But so is the father who walks out on his family. **Positive liberty** means freedom *to* ... to speak your mind, to worship as you please, to assemble, and so forth. Positive freedoms are granted us by law, and are popularly called rights. We have rights only because we submit to the law, and law governs and controls our interactions with others.

The difference can be made clear in a thought experiment. Imagine that you were free to do anything you wanted—negative liberty. Suddenly, all law, all control stopped. Freedom! You can do *anything* and no one can stop you! Finally, freedom for you ... and for the seven-foot thug next to you. He likes your watch, so he smashes in your skull and takes it. Freedom! (You may complain that the thug should be nice. But now you're imposing control on him, you're making a kind of law. In terms of negative liberty, you're oppressing him.) Not only is the thug free, but so is the four year-old child: free to eat poison. And the infirm, free to starve without help; and the weak, and the defenseless, and so forth.

So. When one allows that some constraints are good, the idea of freedom gets a little more complicated. What kind of constraints are good? Should constraints be self-imposed or must they be imposed from without? How do you deal with people who refuse any constraints? (The Pardoner refuses the constraints of good behavior, steals money from widows, and cheats people. How do the pilgrims deal with him? How would you?)

Consider also the difference between law and good behavior: should law impose good behavior? Who has the right to decide what is good behavior and what is not? How do we determine what is good?

¹ The topics for preconceptions come from hundreds of student papers that I have read over the years.

POWER. What do you think power means?

This is perhaps one of the most overused and least understood words in English studies today. Perhaps the word “power” is used because it’s easier to avoid more precise synonyms—such as coercion, authority, force, dominance, control, license, right, sway, and so forth. The word “power” in literary study became *en vogue* chiefly through Michel Foucault, the French Maoist (a version of Marxist-Leninism), who spoke of networks of power in society. Thus are discussions of power almost always tied to materialist assumptions about society.

Do you think power exists as a measurable entity? How do you measure it accurately? Is power a substance? Does power come in chunks (like solid gold) or is it fluid? Do you believe that governments control the disposition of power?

SOCIETY. What is society?

Society is a nineteenth-century notion. As Roland Axtmann notes, society “was conceived as a self-contained cluster of social relationships whose boundaries coincided with the territorial boundaries of the state; in effect, ‘society’ was constructed with reference to another concept, the ‘state.’”² This observation means that when people write about *society*, they may mean the state, or *government*. Or perhaps the family? Or perhaps one’s peers? One’s neighbors?

Notice that there are at least two notions here: one derived from the “society” of “polite society,” the other from sociology. The first means friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. The second does not.

Often, society is used as a metaphor. When students write about society, they often write as if it were a god. Society forces us, society constructs, society tells us—as if society were some *thing* or *person* that acted.

And the metaphor raises questions. If Society is forcing you to do something, how precisely does that happen? Are you an individual, or are you constructed by society (you can’t be both)? Who runs society? Is Society a self-sustaining being?

JUDGMENT. Is it right to judge others?

One prevalent notion that appears again and again in college papers is that one ought not to judge others. It’s an intriguing claim, and Biblical, too—judge not, that ye be not judged (Matthew 7:1).

Yet, here you sit, determining which characters are good, which evil. You judge the quality of a work, the quality of a class. And you submit yourselves to the professional judgment of a professor. Perhaps the notion is that one ought not to judge others *morally*.

Chaucer is going to test that notion. Again and again, you will come across characters who are reprehensible. But notice Chaucer’s ability to treat them as human beings, even the worst of them. To my mind, Chaucer is one of the great humanists simply for his remarkable ability to observe, to criticize, to praise—but all without moral judgment.

²Roland Axtmann, “Society, Globalization and the Comparative Method,” in Paul Dukes, ed., *Frontiers of European Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 3-32, p.3.