

The Meanings of Freedom

By John Hospers

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Everyone, it seems, is in favor of freedom. Amnesty International works constantly to bring about the freedom of prisoners in totalitarian nations, especially from torture and degradation. The A.C.L.U. wishes to extend freedom in the direction of civil liberties, even while it recommends that a Soviet youth be forced to return to the U.S.S.R. because his parents wish it. The Soviet Union itself proclaims its dedication to the “freedom of the Soviet peoples” from the “exploitation” of Western capitalism.

But what is this value that everyone proclaims, at least in words? Without a context, what is being said is far from clear. If you heard a stranger exclaim “I’m free!” what would you be entitled to infer? Perhaps he has just got out of jail; perhaps he has just been divorced; perhaps he has just recovered from an operation; perhaps he has overcome an allergy, or been successfully treated by a psychoanalyst. Like so many words, “freedom” and “liberty” have come to refer to almost any kind of condition of which the speaker approves. When this happens, it is time to clarify our use of the term, so that it refers to something definite enough to convey a clear meaning in our effort to communicate with one another.

Freedom-from vs. Freedom-to

The most important distinction in the discussion of freedom is between *freedom-from* and *freedom-to*. The Soviet expatriate in the U.S. is free from the dictatorship to which he was subject in the U.S.S.R.; the American businessman, after a regulatory act has been repealed, is now free from the restrictions imposed by that regulation. But once this freedom-from has been obtained, a person is free *to* do many things he could not do before: the Soviet expatriate is now free to choose his own line of work, to buy property, to become an entrepreneur and hire workers, and so on; the businessman is free to conduct his business in a way he was legally prohibited from doing before. The more one is free *from* restrictions, the more one is free *to* do things that he could not do while bound by restrictions.

The two are thus intimately related, but they are not quite two sides of the same coin. If I go mountain-climbing and fall into a crevasse, I am not free to move about, or do anything but remain there until help arrives; my choices are extremely limited. And yet, if I went on the expedition voluntarily, there is no question of my lacking free-dora-from: nobody made me go, I was not responding to anyone’s command, nobody coerced me. My present sad plight with regard to freedom-to is not the result of any lack of freedom-from. True, I am not free-from obstacles to my getting out of the crevasse—such as the height of the pit and the lack of rope, etc.—but there are no man-made constraints. Much, then, depends on whether freedom-from is considered freedom from constraints or obstacles in general, or whether it is free-dom from *man-made* constraints and obstacles.

Freedom from the Will of Others: The Absence of Coercion

“The original meaning of the word ‘freedom,’” writes Hayek, “meant always the possibility of a person’s *acting according to his own decisions* and plans, in contrast to the position of one who was irrevocably subject to the will of another, who by arbitrary decision could coerce him to act or not to act in specific ways. The time-honored phrase by which this freedom has often been described is therefore *independence of the arbitrary will of another*. In this sense ‘freedom’ refers solely to a relation of human beings to other human beings, and the only infringement on it is by coercion by other human beings.”^[1] (*Voluntary* compliance with the wishes of others is simply honoring their suggestions or taking their advice, which involves no lack of freedom.)

Freedom-from in this sense is absence of coercion by others; and this, in addition to being the fundamental and original sense of the term, is undoubtedly the most important kind (but, as we shall see, not the only kind) of freedom-from. But this definition in turn requires that we be quite clear about the meaning of the term “coercion.” What is coercion? Let us examine a few cases:

1. A man, stronger than I, forces my hand on the trigger of a loaded gun, and with the strength of his hand on mine forces me to pull the trigger. Is he coercing me? He is certainly using force to get me to do his bidding, and if that is coercion, I am being coerced. But the act of pulling the trigger is not my act; both morally and legally, it is *his* act, and *he* is the killer, not I. I have not *done* anything: I am the passive victim, he the agent. I have not performed a coerced action; I have not performed any action at all.

2. A man with a gun at my back threatens to shoot me if I refuse to hand over my wallet. Rather than surrender my life, I surrender my wallet. Here indeed I have been coerced: I have done something, but I have done under coercion what I would not have done of my own free will (surrendered my wallet). I still had a choice, but my choices were limited by his coercive action; but for the coercion, I would have chosen to surrender neither my life nor my wallet.

3. An employer fires a worker. Has he coerced the worker? Clearly not; he has simply decided to terminate a relationship voluntarily entered into by both parties, either because the worker was no longer needed or because the worker was inadequate to the job. Socialists often call this coercion—or its cousin, “exploitation”—and yet if the worker quits his job for a better one, they would never call it coercion or exploitation. There is an asymmetry in the socialist’s position which is not often noticed. But the one is no more coercion than the other.

4. The employer says, “If you don’t give me your sister in marriage, I’ll fire you.” Here there is clearly a threat; is there coercion? There surely seems to be coercion; one may hesitate in calling it so only because one is not sure about the seriousness of the threat. In most cases the worker would just quit and go somewhere else. Perhaps it was only an *attempt* at coercion?

Coercion can be a matter of degree. It depends on (a) the seriousness of the threat to the person threatened, on (b) whether the threatener is able to go through with the threat, and on (c) the likelihood of his doing so (most threats are idle, like “I’ll kill you” uttered in a bar-room brawl). If someone says to you “*If* you don’t do as I command, I’ll set fire to your house” you are likely to take it as a serious threat, but one to which you may not give in if your house is fully insured, or if your freedom is more valuable to you than the house. If he says, “If you don’t do as I command, I’ll let the air out of your tires,” you might not consider the threat worth responding to: rather than capitulate, you might simply say “Go ahead and do it.” If he says “*If* you don’t do as I command, I’ll plant a nuclear bomb in your house and destroy the

whole city,” the threat is a serious one indeed; but now it is quite probable (varying of course with circumstances) that either he can’t go through with the threat or he won’t. If he both can and probably will, this would indeed constitute a strong case of coercion.

In law, coercion exerted upon you to do something usually counts as excusing of what you have done: it was done “under duress,” and the responsibility for the act shifts to the person who threatened you. But it is not always so: if someone says he will kill you if you don’t kill Mr. X, and everything points to his power and willingness to fulfill his threat, you are nevertheless likely to be liable for murder. (If you could successfully plead duress, and the threatener could repeat his threat, this time demanding that you kill Mr. Y and Mr. Z, you could commit as many murders as the person demanded while getting off scot-free. The law says you should risk being killed yourself rather than fulfilling such threats.)

5. You stake a claim in the desert, build a house, and dig a well. Soon thereafter another man settles on a nearby strip of desert and also builds a house and digs a well. But soon he runs out of water. “Without water I can’t live,” he says to you. “Won’t you give me some of your water, or sell it to me?” But you refuse, saying “My water is not for sale. I may run out of water myself at any time. And even if I don’t, I want to be sure. I simply say, No Sale.” Although by your action you are depriving him of a resource without which he cannot continue to live in the desert, you have not coerced him.^[2] You didn’t make him come there; you and he both took your chances with the desert. Instead of saying that you coerced him, it would be preferable to say “The desert has beaten him.” Perhaps the humane act would have been to give him some water (though this would only be a temporary expedient, and the same problem would arise again the next day), but in any case you have *not* coerced him. His freedom of action (freedom-to) has been restricted by your action, for he can no longer live in his bit of desert; although he may curse you as he leaves the desert, he cannot rightly say that you coerced him.

Neither did the physician use coercion in refusing to sell or give someone else a life-saving medication that he has invented; the physician’s refusal simply places the patient where he would have been anyway without the physician’s invention. Neither has the man who declined to rescue a drowning person coerced him; he may not have done his moral duty (depending on circumstances such as: how good a swimmer is he? is the water dangerous? can he rescue without great risk to himself?, and so forth), but, assuming that the swimmer went voluntarily into the water, he was free-from all coercion both before and after he decided to swim. Even while drowning, he was free in the sense of free-from dictation by others—but not in the sense of being free-to continue his life thereafter.

Freedom as Freedom-from Coercion

There are those who would restrict the meaning to freedom entirely to this sense of absence of coercion. In his fine book, *The Government Against the Economy*,^[3] George Reisman writes:

“In the nature of things it is impossible for me to square circles, walk through walls, or be in two places at the same time. It is not possible for me, in the actual circumstances of my life, to win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry or the Academy Award for Best Actor of the Year, or to enter the automobile or steel business. Absolutely none of these facts constitutes a violation of my freedom. In order for a violation of freedom to exist, it is not sufficient merely that someone be unable to achieve what he desires. What is necessary is that the thing stopping him be the government’s threat to use force against him, specifically, its threat to *initiate* the

use of force against him in response to an action on his part that does not represent the use of force.

“If I ask a girl to marry me, and she says no, my freedom is not violated. But suppose she says yes, and the government stops me from marrying her, say by virtue of a law concerning marriages among people of different races, religions, or blood types—then my freedom is violated.

“If I want to travel to California, but lack the fare and am unwilling to try hitchhiking, my freedom of travel is in no way violated. But suppose I do have the fare to go to California and want to pay it, but the government stops me—say, with a wall around my city (as in East Berlin), a passport restriction, or a price control on aviation fuel that stops the airlines from flying—*then* my freedom of travel is violated.

“Suppose I want to print my views in the *New York Times*, but can neither afford the advertising rates nor persuade the publisher to give me space. My freedom of the press is not violated; I am not a victim of ‘censorship.’ But suppose I do have the money to pay the advertising rates or could persuade the publisher to print my views, and the government disallows *it*—*that* would be a violation of the freedom of the press; that would be censorship.

“If I cannot enter the automobile business because I am unable to raise the money necessary to buy the equipment that would enable me to produce and sell cars as cheaply as General Motors or Ford, my freedom of competition is not violated. But suppose I *can* raise the money to enter the automobile business, I am backed by a major steel company or a domestic auto firm, and the government stops me; then, and only then, would my freedom of competition be violated.”

On Reisman’s account, freedom is not violated unless coercion is employed. Moreover, he narrows the scope of coercion by saying that only when done by *government* does it count as coercion. Though government may be the principal source of coercion in our society, especially in matters of economic freedom, it is surely not plausible to say that *only* government can coerce. Highwaymen, bandits, robbers, rapists, and terrorists can certainly coerce just as effectively, and inhibit one’s free-dom-from being forced to act at the will of others.

The points that Reisman raises certainly need emphasis, but it is questionable whether that emphasis should be provided by so drastically restricting the scope of inhibitions of one’s freedom that only coercion, and coercion by government at that, can violate one’s freedom. In ordinary discourse, at any rate, the word “freedom” is used more widely than that. It is also used in referring to (a) other kinds of freedom-from, as well as to (b) freedom-to.

Though freedom from the arbitrary will of other persons is the principal way one can have freedom-from, there are other things one can be free-from besides the will of other human beings.

A person who was crippled with arthritis and now is cured is surely free from the debilitating ailment that caused him so much distress. A writer who finds himself unable to write anymore (has a “writer’s block”) and seeks help from a psychotherapist, who makes it possible for him to overcome his problem and to write again, has been freed from the “inner obstacle” (whatever it was) that kept him from writing. A person who has powerful inner drives that threaten to destroy him, such as a seemingly uncontrollable urge to kill or to set fires, and who is cured through psychotherapy or behavior modification techniques from having these

urges, is now free from these impediments to his personal developments. A man who, thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous, has gone for twenty years without a drink is now free from the powerful and constant urge to drink. He has been “set free,” not from coercion by other human beings, but from his own destructive inner urges.

Surely these are plausible cases of being free-from, even though no coercion by others is involved.

Freedom-to

To many writers, and certainly to many philosophers, the freedoms-from we have described are incidental: the main sense of freedom is freedom-to. When we are free, we are free *to* do many things; the wider our range of choices, the freer we are. If I am free to do A,B,C . . . S, I am freer than if my choice is limited to just A and B.

In this sense, freedom is highly correlated with *ability*; the wider the range of my choice, the greater my ability to do various things I want. If I have a million dollars, I can spend the winter in the south of France if I want to, or make numerous large investments, or buy another house—things I would not be free to do if I had no wealth. Free-dom-to also gives a person greater *power* (not necessarily political power): it enables people to control aspects of their environment, including other people (if they wish to), as they would not be able to do if they lacked the means to do it.

There are things, of course, we are not free to do even if we have wealth. We cannot, for instance, fly through the air like birds. Is this a limitation on our freedom? Not in the sense of freedom-from coercion; but it is something that, owing to our physiognomy, we are not free *to* do. If your main dream is to fly through the air like a bird, then you will be likely to count your inability to do this as a limitation on your freedom. So is the fact that, though you can bend your legs backward from the knee, you cannot bend them forward.

Freedom to Vote

There is a special area of freedom-to that deserves separate mention: the ability to vote, which is something one is free to do in democracies but not in most totalitarian nations. This freedom is sometimes called “political freedom,” though somewhat misleadingly because that same term can also be used for other things.^[4] Voting is, of course, one of the many things which in democratic nations one is free to do. Unfortunately, however, it does not always achieve the freedom from tyranny which is widely supposed to be its aim.^[5] People are often ignorant and shortsighted, and they often do vote themselves into one or another kind of slavery, often through voting themselves large benefits from the public trough and then suffering runaway inflation and destruction of the currency as an unanticipated result of their actions. A wise man is often outvoted by fools. The freedom to vote, then, while valuable, is far from sufficient to guarantee any other freedom or even render its fulfillment much more probable.

In the writings of the Founding Fathers, freedom always meant freedom from tyranny and oppression. But in today’s political climate, the appeal of freedom has largely shifted to freedom-to. If you take money away from the wealthy via government transfer payments, you can do (are free to do) many things you could not do otherwise; in this sense, the higher your welfare payments, the freer you are. The Soviet Union, by training and arming insurgents in Central Africa, used the lure of “freedom” as their appeal: if you take the farms from the landowners, you

will have them yourself, and then you will be free because you will be rich. The natives would certainly not be free from political control—quite the opposite—but they were promised freedom to do many things with the expropriated money and property that they were unable to do before. As it turned out, what they expropriated soon became (in most cases) useless to them because they lacked the technology to maintain it and a political structure that honored property rights. But the hope and the promise, at any rate, were of increased freedom: the appeal was freedom-to, not freedom-from.

A Dangerous Development

There is no doubt that this shift in the meaning of “freedom” as the term is used in the political arena is a dangerous development. “Once this identification of freedom with power is admitted,” writes Hayek, “there is no limit to the sophisms by which the attractions of the word ‘liberty’ can be used to support measures which destroy individual liberty; no end to the tricks by which people can be exhorted in the name of liberty to give up their liberty. It has been with the help of this equivocation that the notion of collective power over circumstances has been substituted for that of individual liberty, and that in totalitarian states, liberty has been suppressed in the name of liberty.”^[6] It is fatally easy to pass from freedom as the absence of coercion to freedom as the ability to get what we want (via political coercion).

We cannot object that the word is not constantly used in both these ways, for it is. What we can and should do is to emphasize *that they mean two quite different things*. “Whether or not I am my own master and can follow my own choices, and whether the possibilities from which I must choose are many or few, are two entirely different questions. The courtier living in the lap of luxury but at the beck and call of his prince may be much less free than a poor peasant or artisan, less able to live his own life and to choose his own opportunities for usefulness. Similarly, the general in charge of an army or the director of a large construction project may wield enormous powers which in some respects may be uncontrollable, and yet may well be less free, more liable to have to change all his intentions and plans at a word from a superior, less able to change his own life or to decide what to him is most important, than the poorest farmer or shepherd.”^[7]

Some people prefer to be free from tyranny and regulation even at the price of being poor; they remain masters of their own lives. Others prefer to be free to have many choices—or at least they accept the *promise* of having many more choices in the future—while their lives and those of their fellow human beings are ruled and regulated by a powerful central authority. A large part of the history of the twentieth century could be written as the shift from the first, and fundamental, meaning of “freedom” to the second. Both kinds of freedom are doubtless desirable, but people have been all too willing to give up the first kind of freedom for the second, only to find that the second was not after all vouchsafed to them precisely because the first was sacrificed; their fate had been placed in the hands of others.

Freedom and Other Values

It is most important to emphasize, however, that while freedom is an enormously great value, it is not the sum of all values. A person can be free and yet miserable. A person may be free *from* tyranny and oppression and yet depressed, psychotic, or unhappy because of painful injuries. A person may be free *to* do many things and yet unhappy doing any of them.

“Freedom may mean freedom to starve, to make costly mistakes, or to run mortal risks. In the sense in which we use the term [freedom-from], the penniless vagabond

who lives precariously by constant improvisation is indeed freer than the conscripted soldier with all his security and relative comfort.”^[8]

Nor is it even desirable that a person should be as free as possible in either sense. (1) A person should be free *from* others controlling his life, but not if he is a small child or an imbecile. In any case, there are many desirable laws restricting people’s behavior, such as traffic laws, yet every law is a restriction on one’s freedom from control by others. (2) A teenager who has just inherited a million dollars is freer *to* do many things than his peers are, but so much money so early in life may ruin him; it might be better if he had not had this freedom to spend so early in life, before he could handle it. Freedom is a heady wine, which needs to be tempered with responsibility, restraint, and rational thought. Having a considerable degree of it is, at best, a *necessary* condition for one’s happiness or well-being, never a *sufficient* condition.

Freedom and the Market

For the free market to operate, there must be freedom from the whims of dictators and bureaucrats. The market can survive, though crippled, with *some* degree of interference, but when the interference becomes severe enough to keep a man from being able to estimate probabilities into the future, or when his taxes become so high that it is no longer worth his while to continue in operation, the market is no longer able to function so as to produce a vast quantity of goods and services at competitive prices. Freedom-from is indispensable to the market, and is indeed its chief condition.

Freedom-to is a highly beneficial *consequence* of the unimpeded operation of the market. When entrepreneurs are free from economic controls imposed on their activities by others, they will produce a proliferation of goods which the public is then free to consume. This freedom-to on the part of the public is the direct result of freedom from controls which makes the market able to function.

But this is a lesson which, unfortunately, most of the buying public has yet to learn. They want a large diversity of goods at competitive prices, but they are not averse to shackling the producer of these goods so as to make him less able to produce them. But in the economic realm you cannot have the one freedom without the other: freedom-to (for the buyer) and freedom-from (for the producer) are inextricably linked. When the one is lost, so, in a short space of time, is the other. []

1. Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 12.

2. Hayek writes, “True coercion occurs when armed bands of conquerors make the subject people toil for them, when organized gangsters extort a levy for ‘protection,’ when the knower of an evil secret blackmails his victim, and, of course, when the state threatens to inflict punishment and to employ physical force to make us obey its commands. There are many degrees of coercion, from the extreme case of the dominance of the master over the slave or the tyrant over the subject, where the unlimited power of punishment exacts complete submission to the will of the master, to the instance of the single threat of inflicting an evil to which the threatened would prefer almost anything else.” (Hayek, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8.) Yet he

also holds—inconsistently, in my view—that the refusal of the desert-settler to give or sell water to his neighbor is an example of coercion.

3. George Reisman, *The Government versus the Economy* (Ottawa, Illinois: Caroline House, 1980) pp. 97-98.

4. For example, the phrase “political freedom” is sometimes applied to a nation when it is not occupied by the armies of *other* nations. In this sense, Nazi Germany was a free nation, and so are numerous African and Latin American dictatorships.

5. See John Hospers, “Freedom and Democracy,” *The Freeman*, June 1984.

6. Hayek, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

7. Hayek, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

8. Hayek, *op. cit.*, p. 18.