

2010

Freedom at the Price of Happiness

Sam D. Livingston

Trinity College, samuel.livingston@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fypapers>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Livingston, Sam D., "Freedom at the Price of Happiness". *The First-Year Papers (2010 - present)* (2010).
Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fypapers/15>

Freedom at the Price of Happiness

Samuel Livingston

In Chapter Three of his *Philosophy of History*, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel analyzes the relationship between the principle of freedom and the regulations of the State,¹ and how they impact the individual. Through a series of claims, Hegel reaches the paradoxical conclusion that freedom involves law, which requires obedience. So is freedom merely imaginary, if the very way it operates, through the order of the State, inherently involves restriction on action? It is unclear as of yet whether the State killed freedom, but throughout the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel notes the presence of violence in history and seems to condemn it or at least note its destructive nature. If the only way to curb violence is to limit freedoms, than maybe imposing limits is just, even necessary, from the State's point of view. But regardless of whether limiting freedom is the best course of action for the State, the principles of freedom are being eroded by these limits.

But perhaps individual freedom has always been diminished by organized culture, and that our understanding of it has been a utopian ideal seen through the prism of the society in which we live. Maybe we are so used to living under structure and rules that the little space in which we have to maneuver and make our own decisions is seen as "freedom." There must be a greater form of freedom in humanity that we have yet to experience. Granted that the community as a whole benefits from the State's organized structure that includes laws, there must be another way to express individual freedom without becoming selfish. Given the tension in the relationship between the individual and the state, Hegel's discussion of freedom brings to light many of its misunderstandings and provides groundbreaking, however disturbing, support for his paradoxical conclusion.

In starting his analysis, Hegel acknowledges right away that his theory is "contrary to our concept of the State as the actualization of freedom: namely, the view that the human being is free by nature, but that in society and in the state (of which he is necessarily a part) he must limit this natural freedom of his" (*History* 43). It is true that individual freedom to a certain extent must give way to government in order for it to function. When a group of people form a State for governmental and organizational purposes, they sign on to a contract and make an oath to uphold law and order for the sake of the community. For example, when the Pilgrims signed the Mayflower Compact while they crossed the Atlantic, it became the first governing document of Plymouth Colony. In this document, there is a clear theme that all of the settlers need support from each other to survive in this new colony and that they would try to maintain order and selflessness. The Compact states that the settlers want to:

Combine ourselves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices, from time to time, as shall be

¹ In this paper the State refers to a central civil government that drafts and enforces laws for society.

2 Samuel Livingston

thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.²

By signing on to the governing body of Plymouth, the settlers did not experience more freedom. To the contrary, by agreeing to explicitly follow all the laws and ordinances for the sake of the common good, each signer of the Compact agreed to give up a part of his freedom. At the same time, they all agreed that each of their individual sacrifices would ultimately make the community stronger in that they would all benefit from law and order when they were far away from civilization. The settlers had left Europe to seek freedom for their religious practices and successfully escaped religious persecution, which was a great step forward, but they had not yet reached an ideal of perfect freedom upon arrival in the New World.

Who knows what perfect freedom looks like? Can mankind even survive in an environment where there are no consequences for actions and we are free to do as we please? Maybe it is too dangerous for us and we are not to be trusted with it because of our inherent self-interest that dominates everything else when we are put into the state of nature. In the case of the Pilgrims of Plymouth, they would definitely have not survived if they had not cooperated with each other and become a community under the State.

Hegel intends to prove that there is no actualization of freedom in joining the State, there is only the handing over of the freedoms we all possess in our state of nature. There is a good purpose to the State because it keeps in check the dangerous passions of individuals in the state of nature. Despite this good purpose, the State is more of a vehicle of order than one of freedom because by virtue of its very existence it demands that the individual sacrifice for the community as a whole.

The accepted view of the state of nature is that each man is born free with natural rights to do whatever he likes and “enjoy the unlimited exercise of his freedom,” (*History* 43). This view is correct in a way, but just like the view of what it means to be free may be distorted by individual perception, so is the understanding of what it means to live according to the state of nature. If one tries to cite an example of the state of nature at work, he would most likely talk about how humans existed before the formalized state. In such an environment, there would be far fewer disincentives than the ones the judiciary branch supplies us with now that would prevent people from acting out violently against each other.

But Hegel nevertheless makes the claim that even in savage environments, humans still must depend on each other for support, and there are still factors that curb their passions and make them suppress their true emotions. He says, “one can certainly point to the existence of savage conditions, but these are shown to be linked to the passions, to barbarism and acts of violence-and yet these are linked, however primitive they are, to social institutions involving so-called limitations of freedoms,” (*History* 43). Even in the state of nature, it seems that humans are conscious of limitations on actions for the common good. So if even at the most basic and savage levels of human civilization there are limitations of freedom in the form of a social hierarchy, has true

² “The Mayflower Compact.” *ushistory.org*. Independence Hall Association. n.d. Web. 2010.

unfettered freedom ever really existed in human history? To answer that question, the elements that constitute freedom must be defined.

Most people think of freedom as choices one can make within a certain framework, namely the accepted rules and regulations one is used to living with. These rules are generally understood by many to be beneficial to the welfare of the entire society. Although an individual may not be able to commit a destructive and violent act under law, it is recognized that everyone will be better off if each person restrains himself. This is how we view freedom; within the purview of the law under which we live. We may say we have freedom and that makes us happy and patriotic, but our perceived freedom only exists within the confines of the State.

Is this true freedom or freedom at all? It might be according to an abstract, ideal definition if it allows us to feel comfortable in our daily lives. Hegel says, “freedom is forever misunderstood in this way, being known in only a formal, subjective sense, abstracted from its essential objects and aims” (*History* 44). Hegel suggests here that the aims of freedom that the State may promote are only freedom on a restricted and defined level, that are safe to allow the public to enjoy. Are we not responsible enough to handle true freedom? Or is it the very nature of human beings to perpetuate our own limitations?

If limitations of freedom are found in the political State, what is found in its opposite mode of living- the natural state? Hegel argues that even in the state of nature there is no perfect expression of freedom. He says:

[Freedom] must first be achieved and won, and indeed won through an endless process involving the discipline of knowledge and will. So the ‘state of nature’ is not an ideal condition, but a condition of injustice, of violence, of untamed natural drives, inhuman acts, and emotions. (*History* 43)

Hegel’s view of the state of nature is clearly very negative and thus he argues that man must achieve freedom through the discipline of knowledge and will. But is the formation of the State a good example of freedom “achieved and won” using “knowledge and will?” Or must human knowledge and will be directed to establishing a mode of living that has not been created? These attributes certainly exist in the state of nature and have potential to be powerful forces; however the injustice and violence that are also a part of the state of nature do not make it an ideal form of living.

Although Hegel sees the potential for freedom by living in the state of nature, it would not succeed in the end because that potential could never come to fruition. Both the great potential for freedom and the failure to achieve it are due to the basic characteristics of human nature, which is both noble and base. Human beings are instinctively selfish and shortsighted and would end up destroying everything for everyone. A good example of this selfish and destructive drive can be found in the hypothetical theory of Garrett Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons,” (1968) based upon an 1833 pamphlet by William Forester Lloyd. This essay describes a dilemma in which individuals act in their own interest and end up exploiting a limited, common resource that hurts the entire community in the long run. More specifically, the example he uses is of individual farmers letting all their cows graze unrestrained on the shared town

4 Samuel Livingston

common. Even though it is against the best interest of the whole group to ruin the common, if one farmer adds an additional cow to the common, that one farmer still profits while the burden is shared and distributed among the entire group. Other farmers then do the same. Without intervention of any sort, the farmers will continue to exploit the limited resource without conservation of any kind until the whole common is gone because the farmers only had short-term goals.

This dilemma relates nicely to Hegel's point that the state of nature is not an ideal condition, but full of untamed natural drives. Although the farmers experience great freedom in making the choice to send all their cows to the common at the same time, their individual choices are going to work against them in the long run and become the cause of their failure as a group. Without State laws that would limit the amount of time a farmer could let his cows spend on the common, the common will be depleted of all its grass in no time. The intervention of the State would have the effect of extending the life of the common, which would ultimately help the whole community and be beneficial to the farmers. Often the State's laws support long-term goals, whereas the state of nature supports the short-term passions of the individuals. The Tragedy of the Commons demonstrates that giving up some freedom in the present may create a far greater benefit in the future. This example seems to suggest that sovereignty is necessary for our survival and that as human beings our fates are tied together, whether we like it or not.

Interestingly, Hegel does not address the situation of an individual who goes rogue, leaves contemporary society, and sets out to survive on his own. This is a risky and difficult decision because most people today are born into a society that already has a longstanding relationship with the State. As infants, we have no choice but to enter the established community. Parents make the decision for their child because the baby is incapable of communicating his or her choice or even comprehending that he has a choice. Either way, infants involuntarily enter this world governed by the State with all its laws that are enacted for the protection of the community as a whole. In the typical normal case, this infant will grow up to become a solid member of society who has, over childhood become completely socialized regarding expected behavior. Adult citizens will almost automatically know what actions and exercises of freedoms are acceptable and lawful within the sphere of the State.

But there are those who choose to leave material society behind and go off on their own adventure. Such was the case of the true story of Christopher McCandless who sought freedom and solitude in the Alaskan wilderness but died of starvation in Denali National Park in 1992. His story was the subject of the book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer adapted in to a 2007 movie of the same name directed by Sean Penn. After graduating from Emory University with top grades, McCandless donated all his money to charity and set out on his great adventure to the wilderness of Alaska. The film shows him burning his money and social security card and cutting up his credit cards and driver's license in an attempt to disconnect from society and its demands. However, McCandless does not totally leave society, as he relies upon the help and hospitality of people who are sympathetic to his journey to Alaska. However he is fundamentally changed as a person and it becomes clear that he will never be tied down. McCandless is on a journey to measure and find himself in nature and to "just live." Ironically he found death.

Living alone in an abandoned bus along the side of a hiking trail, McCandless learns what it means to live alone. He struggles in the new environment, but more importantly he achieves an uncharted level of freedom; he is free to live his life however he wants to and not be part of a compromising social contract. Because he is completely alone, the state of nature he finds is not the one that Hegel describes as “a condition of injustice, of violence, of untamed natural drives, inhuman acts, and emotions,” (*History* 43). On the contrary, McCandless finds out what it truly means to be human and be completely free, but he is also free of the company of other human beings. McCandless ironically does not find the happiness he made such sacrifices to find and discovers in the end that “happiness is only real when shared.”

Sharing happiness with others requires one to rejoin society and the State, which is back where McCandless started. His utopian ideal was shattered in the end because humans need each other to survive not only in the material sense, but also emotionally. Maybe we are essentially tribal and can only survive in groups. This is ultimately why humans will tolerate the subtle limitations of freedom that comes along with living in a community. Because to live in a world where actions are limited is easier and sharing emotions with other humans leads to happiness. Even though living under the State does not lead to complete freedom, we can tolerate it because it leads to happiness, which is a gateway to freedom of its own right.

Bibliography

Hegel, G.W.F. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Trans. Leo Rauch. Cambridge, M.A.: Hackett Publishing, 1988. Print.

Into the Wild. Dir. Sean Penn. Perf. Emile Hirsch, Vince Vaughn, Catherine Keener. Paramount Vantage, 2007. DVD.

“The Mayflower Compact.” *ushistory.org*. Independence Hall Association. n.d. Web. 2010.