

# **On Freedom: An Attempt to Integrate Three Thinkers' Views**

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## **Introduction**

Despite the seeming contradictions of ideas among Rousseau, Adam Smith and Karl Marx in *The Social Contract*, *The Wealth of Nations*, and the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the three philosophers have all treated the subject of “freedom” in their work. This essay aims to find out whether their views could be reconciled into a consistent system, or if they are fundamentally different from each other. I will begin by summarising their respective views before sorting out their similarities and/or differences.

## **A Look at the Three Thinkers' Views**

### ***Rousseau in The Social Contract***

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau proposes that “man is born free” despite the fact that “everywhere he is in chains” (10; bk. I, ch. I). Man, as he suggests, is the only master of his life, and would not give or sell his liberty

unless it is advantageous to himself.<sup>1</sup> In other words, he, instead of anyone else, should be in full control of his life and choices. This is the basis of Rousseau's view on freedom, and two more crucial points need to be noted.

First, there are two kinds of "freedom," namely, natural liberty and civil liberty. With natural liberty, man has "an unlimited right to everything he tries to get and succeeds in getting" (22; bk. I, ch. VIII), whereas with civil liberty, man maintains security and proprietorship of possessions. Rousseau clearly prefers the latter kind of liberty as he thinks a man transforms from animal to human<sup>2</sup> when he enters the civil state. Rousseau also introduces the phrase "moral liberty," which alone makes a man truly master of himself instead of a slave to his appetite.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, "freedom" does not mean "freedom without limitations." While it is easily understandable that one's natural liberty will be threatened by other individuals' "unlimited rights," it is worth noting that a man in a civil state will also be limited by the general will. It differs from all people's own particular will and "considers only the common interest" (28; bk. II, ch. III). When a man's own will is contradictory to the general will, he is forced to obey it<sup>4</sup> because it would be concluded that this man is mistaken in

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1 "The common liberty results from the nature of man. His first law is to provide for this own preservation, his first cares are those which he owes to himself; and, as soon as he reaches years of discretion, he is the sole judge of the proper means of preserving himself, and consequently becomes his own master . . . and all, being born free and equal, alienate their liberty only for their own advantage." (11; bk. I, ch. II)

2 The original passage reads: ". . . instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made him an intelligent being and a man" (22; bk. I, ch. VIII).

3 Rousseau writes, ". . . add, to what man acquires in the civil state, moral liberty, which alone makes him truly master of himself; for the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe is slavery." (22; bk. I, ch. VIII)

4 ". . . that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body." (21; bk. I, ch. VII)

his view.<sup>5</sup> Refusing to obey may even result in exile or death.<sup>6</sup> This situation may give rise to the argument that man is “forced to be free” and does not enjoy unlimited freedom. The challenge, however, may be responded by citing Rousseau’s view on moral liberty (32; bk. II, ch. V) again, for people who obey the general will, which is regarded as their will, is obeying their reason instead of their appetite.

### ***Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations***

Undoubtedly the concept of “freedom” has been used in terms of economics by Adam Smith in his work. A classic example is that he recommends free competitions in market and non-intervention by the government,<sup>7</sup> for such “freedom” is always vital to price regulation,<sup>8</sup> and could supply the public with the goods that they desire.<sup>9</sup> In fact, beside the factors suggested by the author, an assumption that division of labour could work well is that people are free to exercise their talents and then exchange it for others. Freedom is thus an essential tool to bring efficiency to the market and benefits to the people.

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5 “When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so.” (86; bk. IV, ch. II)

6 “[H]e must be removed by exile as a violator of the compact, or by death as a public enemy; for such an enemy is not a moral person” (32; bk. II, ch. V).

7 “In general, if any branch of trade, or any division of labour, be advantageous to the public, the freer and more general the competition, it will always be the more so.” (Smith 421; bk. II, ch. II)

8 “The natural price, or the price of free competition, on the contrary, is the lowest which can be taken, not upon every occasion indeed, but for any considerable time together.” (87; bk. I, ch. VII)

9 “We trust, with perfect security, that the freedom of trade, without any attention of government, will always supply us with the wine which we have occasion for: and we may trust with equal security that it will always supply us with all the gold and silver which we can afford to purchase or to employ, . . .” (547; bk. IV, ch. I)

It is also crucial to look further in his work to discover the extended concept of liberty or freedom, which is not only crucial in the economy but also a fundamental thing that every man is entitled to have. An example is that man should have the right to choose where to reside as long as it is just.<sup>10</sup> Equally, a man should have the right to “pursue his own interest.”<sup>11</sup> The role of the sovereign, following the discussion of “natural liberty,” is to protect the members of the state and to maintain certain public works<sup>12</sup> without any other interference on personal freedom.

This “freedom,” or “natural liberty” is, nonetheless, not unlimited in the sense that it may be restrained by regulations when the person “endanger[s] the security of the whole society.”<sup>13</sup> It indicates that, to Smith, personal freedom is inferior to the public interest.

### ***Karl Marx in Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844***

Loss of “freedom” in Karl Marx’s work might sometimes refer to the

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- 10 “To remove a man who has committed no misdemeanour from the parish where he chuses to reside, is an evident violation of natural liberty and justice.” (194; bk. I, ch. X)
- 11 “All systems either of preference or of restraint, therefore, being thus completely taken away, the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men.” (873; bk. VI, ch. IX)
- 12 According to the system of natural liberty, the sovereign has only three duties to attend to; three duties of great importance, indeed, but plain and intelligible to common understandings: first, the duty of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies; secondly, the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice; and, thirdly, the duty of erecting and maintaining certain public works, and certain public institutions, which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals to erect and maintain; because the profit could never repay the expence to any individual, or small number of individuals, though it may frequently do much more than repay it to a great society (874; bk. VI, ch. IX).
- 13 “But those exertions of the natural liberty of a few individuals, which might endanger the security of the whole society, are, and ought to be, restrained by the laws of all governments” (414; bk. II, ch. II).

fact that the workers are left with no choices other than working for the capitalists, but the focus in this text is undoubtedly put on the freedom that the workers lose during their work.<sup>14</sup>

This loss could be illustrated in three ways. First, that the worker feels that the result of his labour becomes an “alienated or hostile force”,<sup>15</sup> because his labour becomes objectified and it is not bringing him any completed product which belongs to him. The worker then becomes the “slave of the object” and even a “slave of nature” (460). Secondly, since the work is outside the worker’s nature, it becomes “forced labour” which makes him feel miserable<sup>16</sup> and being a slave to another person.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, the worker produces merely for sustaining his physical life, out of his own physical needs, and fails to contribute to other species or to nature as a whole by a more universal production. It could then be seen that the worker has become a slave of his physical needs as animals do, and his important conscious, objective and universal “species-life” is treated to be a means to individual physical existence.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Marx’s idea of “freedom” of Marx mainly focuses on men’s difference from animals by the actualisation of freedom through labour. The workers who are deprived of “freedom” are not physically confined but made to lose the mentality of living as a “species-being” and of differentiating themselves from animals.

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14 “The more they want to earn the more they must sacrifice their time and perform slave labour in which their freedom is totally alienated in the service of avarice.” (455)

15 “[I]t stands opposed to him as a autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force.” (459)

16 “[T]hat the work is external to the worker, that is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfil himself in work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being.” (461)

17 “[T]hat in work he does not belong to himself but to another person.” (461)

18 “It makes species-life into a means of individual life . . . his being, only a means for his existence.” (463)

## Comparison

Under careful analysis we may see some resonances of each thinker's view on "freedom" in the other two. In other words, the idea of "liberty" underlies all three texts.

Despite Smith's use of the term "natural liberty" to describe the freedom that man deserves to have, similarities could be drawn to Rousseau's view on the freedom to which every man is entitled, despite the branches of liberty that the latter philosopher proposes. Both philosophers agree that man should be entitled to choose how to conduct his life, and that the sovereign should ensure the security of the members, although the meaning of the term "sovereign" in the two texts may differ.

Both Rousseau's and Smith's "liberty" is subject to limitation, and the condition is similar. The general will, as claimed by Rousseau, aims at the good of the whole populace,<sup>19</sup> so those who work against it could be said to be "endanger[ing] the security of the whole society" (Smith 414; bk. II, ch. II; see note 13) as suggested by Smith. That means, to a certain extent, they both think that a single man's freedom could be overridden by the whole society's benefits.

Rousseau's ideas could also be associated with Marx's. While discussing slavery Rousseau suggests that the master has not killed the slave "without profit" but "kill him usefully" (18; bk. I, ch. IV). This could be seen as Rousseau's agreement that losing freedom is losing one's life because the slaves have no longer been the masters of themselves. Marx, too, regards the workers as slaves and thinks that they belong to others in work. As the

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19 In Rousseau's own words: "... that the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage." (28; bk. II, ch. III)

workers' labour becomes a means to sustain life (463), it is sufficient to say that the workers have been "killed" in this way.

Another similarity could be drawn between the "moral liberty" suggested by Rousseau and the "species-life" that Marx proposes, that humans do not always work only because of their own physical needs but could liberally work under reason and consciousness built towards the world. The mere obvious difference is that the law that the former one sees is the embodiment of the general will, while such law in the latter one's mind is the law of nature.

How about the views on "freedom" between Smith and Marx? It might be first suggested that the two's views must be fundamentally different as their ideologies are opposite to each other. To evaluate this claim/statement, it must first be clarified that in order to be "fundamentally different," the views should always be contradictory, where the existence of one automatically rejects the existence of the others. This criterion is not satisfied in the case discussed here.

As stated above, Smith's "freedom" could be interpreted in terms of the "market" and the thing that every man is entitled to, while Marx's ideas on "freedom" largely focus on the human essence. The worker may be free to choose working longer if he wishes, but during the course of work he is not free. The paradox of the previous statement stems from the two interpretations of "freedom." Put it simply, Smith's, and even Rousseau's ideas regarding "freedom" are concerning the external world of man, emphasizing the freedom from external interference or constraints imposed, whereas Marx's is regarding the internal world of man, pursuing the freedom from misery, and the degradation into animals. Views that are focusing on distinct aspects could certainly not rule out each other's existence.

It should be additionally clarified that, the fact that Marx thinks that workers have no other free choices but to choose to continue working for more wages, is not contradictory to Smith's views either. It is because what Smith emphasises is that man is entitled to the liberty of choices, but not that man could necessarily acquire such freedom under every condition. By referring to the requirements that Smith imposes on the sovereign (see note 12), it could even be deduced that, if the situation of inequality that Marx describes is happening, the interference of the sovereign might be essential so to protect one member from another member who acts unjustly. It is, certainly, too far to suggest that Smith and Marx share the same thoughts, but from this perspective, it could at least be further proposed that Smith does not aim at exchanging freedom of market with exploitation of any man, and Marx agrees that choice is an important element of man's freedom. Therefore, their views on "freedom" may differ but not in any fundamental way.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the views on "freedom" of Rousseau, Adam Smith and Karl Marx have their own characteristics and may differ from the others, but the distinction is far from being fundamental. In contrast, they could be generalised and merged into a consistent system of thoughts. It might be the best to end this essay by attempting to state the integrated views. Every man, who is born free and equal, is, first, entitled to freedom of choosing his way of living and controlling his actions, while subject to the rule that the exercise of this freedom should not harm the others. Second, he ought to live as a "species-being" who could act freely according to his labour, he ought to live like a human being who is distinct from an animal, he ought not to treat life as a means to live. What is left uncertain, is that the freedom of choices

and actions may not essentially brings freedom in mentality, but this does not affect the reconciliation of views, as the two freedoms are not mutually exclusive either.

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## Teacher's comment:

This is an ambitious paper. Hoi Yung tries to argue in detail that Rousseau's, Smith's and Marx's concepts of freedom are compatible. As she writes, "they could be generalised and merged into a consistent system of thoughts." Her summaries of those great thinkers show that she has a deep understanding of the texts. Admitting the differences between the concepts of freedom of the three thinkers, she takes a further step to argue that their views on freedom are still compatible. This reveals that she has a flexible mind in reading and interpreting the texts. Differences do not imply

that things are incompatible. Though having some minor mistakes, this paper is still an excellent one. (Lau Po Hei)