

Superman and Freedom

Editor's Pick. Written by Chris Brown in November 2008.

If man is really free, how can we account for his inability to fly, to travel through time, to leap across the ocean, for not being omniscient or omnipotent? In short, wouldn't man have to be more like Superman to actually be free? Man is constrained in some ways, isn't he? Is man really free then?

In *The Ethics of Liberty* Murray Rothbard makes a crucial, yet subtle, distinction that we will get to later. It is an important insight, and essential for the libertarian to understand and explain libertarian philosophy.

Returning to the original "dilemma": What then can we say about the limits of man's abilities? Rothbard discusses this in his section on "A Crusoe Social Philosophy":

Some critics have charged that this freedom is illusory because man is bound by natural laws.

It is true that man is bound by natural, or "God-given," laws. He does not possess certain abilities or powers — he is bound by scarcity all around. Examples are abundant.

The power to leap across the ocean is not given to man. However, man's ingenuity has led him to search for and find ways to travel across the ocean by boat or submarine. Man realized his limits, i.e., not being able to breathe underwater for long periods of time, or swim great distances without rest or sleep; he does not have the power to do so. Man submitted to natural laws and through obedience used them to construct boats and ships.

The power to fly is also not given (naturally) to man. Yet man has found ways to achieve flight according to natural laws, which, when heeded, have allowed man to fly in any number of ways, e.g., hang-glide, helicopter, airplane, parachute.

The power to lift extremely heavy objects is also not found in man's (bodily) abilities. Man has learned natural laws to design mechanisms that can lift objects that weigh over a thousand times what man could lift alone.

Man has operated within natural laws, and those who best understand and adapt to natural laws are those who can use them to their advantage. But how does this affect man's freedom to act?

Rothbard, in answering critics who construct an argument to (attempt to) show that man is not ultimately free, points out how man is free:

We have seen that Crusoe, as in the case of any man, has freedom of will, freedom to choose the course of his life and his actions.

Man may choose his actions — but what about the constraints of nature and scarcity? Here is where Rothbard's subtlety and insight comes in. The argument is not whether man is free in regards to natural laws "impeding" his abilities. Rothbard clarifies:

Man is free to adopt values and to choose his actions; but this does not at all mean that he may violate natural laws with impunity — that he may, for example, leap oceans at a single bound. In short, when we say that "man is not 'free' to leap the ocean," we are really discussing not his lack of freedom but his lack of power to cross the ocean, given the laws of his nature and of the nature of the world. (Emphasis added.)

In other words, man cannot escape or overcome natural laws, but this has nothing to do with freedom; it has everything to do with power, or the ability to perform a given task. Man is free to exercise his agency, to make free choices regarding his actions and values, despite "limitations" placed on him by natural laws. If we put this another way, says Rothbard, "it is patently absurd to define the 'freedom' of an entity as its power to perform an act impossible for its nature!"

In other words, man is not Superman, but make no mistake: Man is free to choose!