

What is Liberty?



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"The Self Owner" is an original weekly column appearing every Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Spencer W. Morgan. Spencer is a husband and father, and has studied History and Philosophy at the University of Utah. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Last week we addressed some of the presumptions inherent to a conversation, and established why starting from a common definition of something such as "liberty" is so critical. Engaging in a conversation (or especially an entire series of columns) about "liberty" without starting from a clearly-defined concept is a giant absurdity. Let's examine, then, what liberty means.

At its core, liberty means freedom of action. This is a definition evident so often from the context of most people's use of the term, even in the casual uses not caught up in the trappings of political application. So does this simple of a definition work?

The trick to testing the validity of this notion of liberty (as with all principles) is to apply it objectively, or as applying universally to all. If a principle can not be applied universally without contradictions, it means that either it is an incorrect principle or that it lacks the specificity it needs to be universally applicable. If liberty means merely any use of a capability, then there is going to be an inevitable conflict when this is applied universally. Obviously, there is conflict between me using my "liberty" (acting capability) to tie you up with duct tape and put you in my basement, and your "liberty" to actions you could take if I didn't do that. Now we have a contradiction. So does this mean liberty, or the notion of being free to act should be rejected entirely as bad, or that it needs more specificity to be applied? I believe the latter is the case here. Before we get into the needed specificity, let's talk about a common mistake in thinking that has its origins in what we've just understood.

Many who still see "liberty" as the ability to take any action follow their intuitive belief that liberty is valuable, but then accept the notion that liberty must be limited to live among others peacefully. This is a mistake because such thinking repudiates the idea of liberty unnecessarily when what was really needed was to continue defining liberty to reach a universal, objective notion.

If your actions to harm another or restrain them in their use of their body are inhibited (either by an outside actor or by yourself according to a moral rule) it's easy to think you are "less at liberty" to do something, and reach the conclusion from an individual sense that you have lost liberty to action. However, your action would have reduced another's freedom to action. Therefore free action, in the objective sense, was not being reduced by the inhibition, but protected. It is only in the limited, subjective view of a situation that free action is viewed as being reduced to live peacefully in society.

We've now effectively ruled out the "capability" definition of liberty, which is an all-too-common confusion. There are things which we should be free to attempt with our action, but of which we may not be capable. Our liberty to try is not any less valid because we might not succeed, and our liberty is not reduced by the factual reality of our incapacity. Our initial definition of liberty as "free action" needs to be refined to specify the inherent limits implied by the freedom to action of others.

What actions fall within liberty? What caveat do we need to add to reach a definition that can be applied without running into such a contradiction? I'll address this in next week's column.