



The Fundamental Concept of “Freedom”

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Introduction

The fundamental concept of “freedom” has been one that permeates history. Today, people regard freedom as an inalienable right not only because renowned philosophers and politicians have stressed its significance of it. One values freedom as it is the primary force that drives social progress. This essay will assume that by the word “freedom”, one generally refers to two kinds of freedom: physical and spiritual. The former kind encompasses the freedom to travel, the freedom to work, and the freedom to act in the physical world without hindrance; the latter kind includes the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, or the freedom of thought and expression. Modern societies often place more weight on spiritual freedom, but physical freedom is the foundation for spiritual freedom. This essay will examine the importance of physical and spiritual freedom through case studies of ancient China, India, and Europe during the Enlightenment.

Example 1: Spring and Autumn Period of China

In ancient China, the Spring and Autumn period witnessed the flourishing of philosophy and theories on politics. This time of continuous warfare and chaos from 770 to 476 BCE did not allow a single political force or regime to control large swathes of China. There were long periods of uncertainty and back-and-forth between different powers. Such chaotic times proved to be indirectly beneficial for pioneering thinkers and social experimenters to gain influence. This period witnessed such an unprecedented burst of pioneering philosophy that Chinese historians have labeled it the era of “A Hundred Schools of Thought”.

While certain risks were magnified, philosophers and theorists during the Spring and Autumn Period possessed physical freedom. That is, they could travel across China without physical exposure to risks of captivity or large-scale political persecution. For example, Confucius famously visited most major states from around 497 BCE to 483 BCE. Throughout these 14 years of extensive travelling, Confucius, known for his poignant comments on politics, did not experience major restraints on his physical freedom. Various states captured him several times, but these captures were usually short and did not negatively impact his political career. China then granted such physical freedom precisely because there was no political or military hegemon. No state could exert total control over vast regions or the paths of scholars like Confucius.



Physical freedom was indispensable for the “A Hundred Schools of Thought” to emerge. First, one can only find inspiration if they are physically allowed and can move around. Retake the example of Confucius. During his extensive travels across China, he sought inspiration from many contemporary thinkers and masters in various fields, such as Lao Tzu, arguably the most important philosopher in the Taoist School. His meeting with Lao Tzu partially explains the similarities between the Confucian and Taoist schools. Confucius took some of the ideas from Taoism and adjusted his thoughts accordingly. For instance, Confucius argued that people’s natural “morality” should be the basis for any form of rule. This emphasis on “morality” can be traced to an argument by Lao Tzu that every pattern or creation in this world resulted from some natural order and that people should follow this natural order when making decisions. From this example, one can see that Confucius could make his school and system of thought as significant as it has been acknowledged, thanks to his physical freedom to visit different areas and different groups of individuals.

Second, physical freedom was imperative since it gave the thinkers platforms to disseminate their thoughts. Confucius could travel extensively and spread Confucianism thanks to his physical freedom. As *The Analects*, a book that systematically collected the teachings of Confucius, recorded, Confucius taught innumerable amounts of students located in many different states.

The Chinese philosophers from the Spring and Autumn Period also possessed spiritual freedom. That is, they were free to formulate unique opinions and express them in any suitable way. No central authority was powerful enough to dictate thoughts across vast areas. The term “A Hundred Schools of Thought” is a testimony to the level of spiritual freedom that the Chinese thinkers experienced. For instance, one school was the “Legalist School”. This school believed that the most effective way to rule would be through stringent law codes and serious punishments. However, another mainstream school of thought was the “Taoist School”. People who championed the Taoist School argued that it would be best to follow the patterns in nature and reject too much artificial design. These two schools opposed each other directly, but they coexisted during roughly the same period. Their coexistence was due to the general lack of centralized authority that could clamp down on the freedom of expression.

Spiritual freedom was vital for the Chinese philosophers. One can view spiritual freedom as the cornerstone for pioneering ideas. With restrictions on speech or thought, it would be difficult to imagine Confucius coming up with his groundbreaking comments on human nature and political structure, as he would be fearful of expressing politically wrong opinions. Further, an idea can only be pioneering if it can bring some form of impact to a broader audience or society. Spiritual freedom gives ideas the wings to fly a unique path, which would prevent these ideas from blindly conforming to social orders. Authoritarian states have restricted spiritual freedom, which pinned ideas to dogmatic social structures, making it difficult to generate social vitality or an innovative

spirit. Most major schools from the “A Hundred Schools of Thought” could deliver transcending remarks that completely reimagined the social order thanks to purer spiritual freedom.

Example 2: Siddhartha Gautama and Buddhism

Another noteworthy culture during the Axial Age was ancient India. One of the periods that witnessed the burst of inventive philosophy occurred around the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. The leading figure of Indian philosophy during this time was a prince called Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly known as Buddha. He was regarded as the founder of Buddhism, which seeks spiritual freedom.

Born a prince that lived luxuriously in a palace, Siddhartha Gautama did not possess much physical freedom at first. He was not allowed to leave the palace until he was 29. Although he enjoyed a well-protected lifestyle, the lack of physical freedom and lavish lifestyle took a toll on his mental state. As the years passed, Siddhartha felt barren spiritually. He could not see the complex nature of his surroundings, so he had no inspiration to fill in the blanks in his mind.

Fortunately, at the age of 30, Siddhartha eventually gained physical freedom. According to tradition, one night, he left the palace on his own to go for a walk. What called him to leave his palace could be his heart that yearned for freedom and desired to observe the reality. From that point onwards, Siddhartha never returned to his palace, having spent the rest of his life travelling around Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka.

Physical freedom proved to be crucial for Siddhartha to reach enlightenment. Just like Confucius, Siddhartha utilized his physical freedom to look for inspiration. For example, his meditation focused on solving his questions about human suffering and desire. However, he came up with these questions based on four real observations of his surrounding environment. Shortly after he left the palace, he saw a man bent with old age, a person afflicted with sickness, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. These sights prompted him to wonder why suffering occurs and how to alleviate it. Along his journey, Siddhartha met some renowned teachers of philosophy. These teachers taught him about the prevalent religions and beliefs around India and its neighboring regions. Although Siddhartha was not satisfied with his learning, his lessons with these teachers gave him a more comprehensive mind. Without physical freedom, most of this inspiration would not be found, and the road to enlightenment would be more crooked.

Unlike physical freedom, Siddhartha had an innate spiritual freedom that could not be imprisoned. His environment allowed him to freely explore, formulate, and articulate opinions or beliefs. But the true driving force behind Siddhartha’s journey to enlightenment was his irrepressible yearning to seek knowledge and his will to not easily conform to any system of



thought. When his father “imprisoned” him in the palace, he was unwilling to let his spirit fall into the void. He always had this hidden curiosity and a keen eye for the real world outside the palace. Siddhartha kept his mind clean for his entire life, allowing him to enter a state of pure meditation.

Siddhartha’s spiritual freedom was what shaped his thoughts that coalesced into Buddhism. Buddhism is, in many ways, quite different from other universalizing religions. For instance, Buddhism concentrates more on human nature and the natural cycles of life. Buddhism does not deify its founder or any of its sages but teaches the history of their lives and how they came to enlightenment. In other words, Buddhism is a religion that devotes more attention to the real elements of reality. One can attribute these unique aspects to the spiritual freedom of Siddhartha, which allowed him to think out of the box and focus intrinsically on objective observations of reality, irrespective of overarching social norms.

Example 3: The Enlightenment Thinkers

As explained in the previous essay, Aristotle can be regarded as one of the greatest intellectuals in western history, who carried out pioneering work in many academic fields. He heralded a western tradition of prudent research, reasoning, and comprehensive observations of reality. Aristotle could create outstanding work in many fields due to his physical and spiritual freedom. About 2000 years later, in 17th-century Europe, there was a similar burst of new philosophy and theory. This burst is known as the Age of Enlightenment.

Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries was plagued by continuous warfare, such as the Dutch Revolt (Eighty Years War) or the notorious Thirty Years War from 1618 to 1648. These wars destabilized the situation in Europe and there were many shifts in power. For instance, the 1600s witnessed the decline of Spain and the rise of France and Great Britain. These power shifts ensured that no kingdom or empire had the clout to control vast areas of Europe and that there would be a strong diversity of culture.

Philosophers and writers at that time indirectly benefited from this chaos. Like the thinkers during the Spring and Autumn Period in China, these European scholars enjoyed physical freedom. Take the example of John Locke, one of the most influential thinkers of his era. John Locke spent most of his life in his birthplace, England. England in the 17th century was tumultuous with fights for power between the Crown and politicians who wanted to form a republic. Although Locke was an ardent participant in politics, this situation almost played to his advantage, as he could express his pioneering thoughts on government without worrying excessively about getting imprisoned physically.

The possession of physical freedom yet again permitted John Locke to seek inspiration and the ideas of contemporary thinkers. During his years as a student, Locke could travel around England to learn knowledge. For example, at Christ Church, Oxford, Locke became obsessed with the works of Rene Descartes, inspiring him to delve into experimental philosophy and the liberal arts. In 1667, Locke traveled to London to meet Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the First Earl of Shaftesbury. Anthony Ashley-Cooper left profound impacts on the political views of Locke and encouraged him to work on some of his most notable writings, including *Two Treatises of Government*. Without physical freedom, Locke would probably not encounter these influential figures that left such positive marks on his system of thinking.

The Enlightenment thinkers also experienced a time of relative spiritual freedom. Many places across Europe, such as France, underwent profound changes in their politics, economics, and social structures. Periods of transition exerted less rule over the freedom of thought and expression. The French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a case in point. Rousseau was born in 1712 and spent a major portion of his life under the reign of Louis XVI. The French society during the time of Louis XVI was full of tension and clashes between the different social groups. Under such a tense circumstance, Rousseau found space and freedom to formulate his groundbreaking views on a democratic government and the “general will”. His novel arguments concerning the structure of a government heralded the French Revolution and a tremendous shift in European politics from monarchism to democracy.

The spiritual freedom in Rousseau and most other Enlightenment thinkers proved vital for their ideas to effect a greater impact. Only with spiritual freedom could these Enlightenment philosophers have the audacity to experiment with trailblazing concepts concerning politics and the liberal arts. For instance, Rousseau’s concepts of the “general will” and “direct democracy” could become the cornerstones of the radical French Revolution because these ideas reached far into the unknown and were wildly imaginative. As an example, in one segment of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau inventively argued that revolutions are in many ways inevitable, writing, “periods of violence...when revolutions do to peoples what certain crises do to individuals, when the horror of the past takes the place of forgetting, and when the State aflame with civil wars is so to speak reborn from its ashes and recovers the vigor of youth as it escapes death's embrace”. These arguments that urged many to rethink history and politics could only appear thanks to the spiritual freedom of Rousseau.

Conclusion

Overall, this essay illustrated that physical and spiritual freedom are two prerequisites for an age of philosophy. Further, through case studies of history’s most influential and brilliant thinkers and periods, it is clear that these two kinds of freedom have immense potential power. For an



individual, planting the feet solidly on the ground and caring genuinely for the world are needed to keep the body and mind free. For a society, constructing a free and tolerant environment and encouraging the growth of diversity are the fuel for social development. However, it should be noted that restraint must be put on spiritual freedom in particular. When philosophers have the total freedom to express their thoughts, it can often lead to detrimental extremism. Societies have mostly achieved the macro balance through continuous experimentation and oscillations between authoritarianism and liberalism.



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