

Understanding Rousseau's Forced Freedom Through Two Concepts of Liberty

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How can someone be "forced to be free"? Why is the arrest of a drunk driver not actually against their will? This paper answers these questions by drawing parallels between Rousseau's "Social Contract" and Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty". The coherence of "forced freedom" depends on a specific understanding of "freedom"—namely Isaiah Berlin's notion of "Positive freedom". Positive freedom suggests that free actions are those which act in affirmation of a will rather than those acting in the absence of obstacles. Therefore, Positive freedom is concerned with the source of a will. Rousseau's forced freedom is meant to be applied in cases of incongruence between an individual's various whims, wills, and deep interests. Forced freedom does not act against a will but acts as a rationalization of an existing will to illuminate what it truly desires. In the case of the drunk driver, their implicit participation in society means that they must understand through some capacity why established drunk driving laws exist. An individual's belief in Positive freedom is therefore necessary in order for them to internalize the coercion of the state and to allow themselves to be "forced to be free".

A major paradox of "The Social Contract" is how Rousseau simultaneously calls for the forceful imposition of the social contract, bluntly suggests that yielding to force is not a free act, yet maintains that subjects of the social contract are free. This paradox is apparent from three passages. First, Rousseau calls for forceful imposition of the contract by suggesting that "whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be *forced to be free*" (SC 1.7.8).^[1] This statement comes a few chapters after Rousseau claims that "[f]orce is a physical power, and I fail to see what moral effect it can have. To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will" (SC 1.3.1). Lastly, Rousseau suggests that subjects of the social contract "may still obey [themselves] alone, and remain as free as before" (SC 1.6.4). How can Rousseau coherently suggest that subjects of the social contract are free to obey themselves alone while suggesting that the conditions of this contract be imposed through force which causes subjects to act necessarily? The resolution to this paradox lies within Rousseau's claim that one can be "forced to be free". In this paper I will argue that the coherence of "forced freedom" depends on a "Positive" understanding of freedom. This means that free actions are considered to be those which act in affirmation of a will rather than those acting in the

absence of obstacles. To make this argument, I will discuss Negative and Positive freedom respectively and apply them to an analogy of a drunk driver in order to explain why “forced freedom” is necessarily “forced *Positive* freedom”. The contentions of forcing freedom on individuals in a real life setting are brought up in the final section.

The contradiction of “forced freedom” emerges when we adopt a Negative view of freedom such as the primitive sense of freedom that Rousseau believes existed in the state of nature. Rousseau suggests that freedom in the state of nature “...does not consist so much in doing one’s will, as in not being subjected to the will of others” (OC, volume 3, p. 841 as cited in Neuhouser, 1993, p.380). This freedom is similar to what Isaiah Berlin describes as Negative liberty which is concerned with the question “[w]hat is the area within which the subject - a person or group of persons - is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?” (Berlin, 1958, p.2). For an individual to be free in this sense, they would be able to do something other than what is imposed on them by others. However, this interpretation leads to the paradox mentioned in the introduction. If an individual is Negatively free under the social contract, their domain of action must be unrestricted by other people or nature. Being forced to accept the social contract is clearly an obstacle. Rousseau can not coherently call for “forced freedom” if freedom is based on the state of nature where freedom was a matter of overcoming physical obstacles.

To illustrate the incompatibility of “forced freedom” with Negative freedom, let’s use an analogy of a drunk driver. According to Negative freedom, an individual is free to the extent they do not have constraints. In this case, the drunk driver is free to the extent that they are able to drive drunkenly without interference from other people. Therefore, if drunk driving is against the law of the social contract, the forced imposition of the contract is a constraint on the drunk driver’s domain of action. The paradox of “forced freedom” is not resolved since the driver’s participation in the social contract merely places more constraints on what they can do without interference.

Rousseau develops another concept of freedom applicable to modern society. This freedom is what Isaiah Berlin describes as “Positive liberty”—in other words it is concerned with the question “[w]hat, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” (Berlin, 1958, p.2). For an individual to be free in this sense, they would be able to act in affirmation of their will. The question of identity, and the source of will becomes a central issue of Positive freedom. For a contradiction of freedom to occur, an individual must submit their particular will to another will. Rousseau proposes the General Will as a way to mediate between conflicting sources of control (SC 1.6). The general will is different to a particular will since it is a pooling of rights and power into a social association (SC 1.6). Rousseau suggests that this process of mediation is self-imposed because the social contract involves “obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves” (SC 1.8.3). Since a particular will might be contrary to the general will, the disparity between these two wills in spite of association creates a problem since the submission of any will at all would deny Positive freedom to an individual. If we think of the coercion of the state as something which acts upon the *priority* of wills rather than against the wills themselves, “force” merely becomes an illumination of reason—an individual freely accepts the social contract only insofar as they believe and will the universal in the first place. The act of compelling is not directed against an individual’s will, but against their reason—they ultimately remain the agent who chooses to act reasonably. This is what Rousseau means when he says: “The

individuals see the good they reject; the public wills the good it does not see. All stand equally in need of guidance. The former must be compelled to bring their wills into conformity with their reason; the latter must be taught to know what it wills” (SC 2.6.10). Therefore, a disagreeable Individual Will must have been agreeable with the General Will in some capacity. The individual is always free because they always acts in affirmation of the source of their will which is (after the application of force) always the General Will. Therefore, understanding “forced freedom” as “forced rationality” makes it consistent for incongruent interests to be mediated through the social contract since this force does not actually interfere with their Positive freedom.

Returning to the analogy of the drunk driver from the perspective of Positive freedom, the drunk driver would free to the extent that it is their will to drive drunkenly. Yet the drunk driver belongs to the general will of the social contract and the general will has agreed to outlaw drunk driving. The particular will of the drunk driver might disagree with the General Will. However, this incongruence is because this individual is not in tune with their deepest interests which are of the General Will. They might at least intuitively realize that not wanting to be the victim of some else’s drunk driving is a reason not be a drunk driver themselves—they faintly acknowledge that drunk driving laws are a good idea. Therefore the act of arresting this drunk driver is not coercion against their will, it is a forceful imposition—an illumination—of rationality that reminds the driver of their own interests. This case exemplifies how being “forced to be free” is not contradictory to Positive freedom.

An issue to consider is the practical application of “forcing” freedom upon individuals. It’s hard to imagine that individuals might have a substratum of rationality while also being capable of performing irrational acts that they can dislike in retrospect. Rousseau does not make it clear at which point, continuous and deliberate violation of the General Will would mean that a given individual never embraced those principles in the first place. Consider the example of the sociopath who acts without a conscience yet knows that what they are doing is wrong. A sociopath would revel in doing wrong and even understand that they deserve punishment, but would not feel empathy. Is this really incongruence of wills? A sociopath might be very rational and act with premeditation rather than ignorance. The anti-social acts of such an individual would not be out-of-character acts as Rousseau might suggest—they are not acts begging to be corrected—their essence simply rejects Positive freedom by choice rather than by cognitive fault. Also consider the prominence of neoliberalism which seems to reflect a growing acceptance of freedom as the removal of restrictions in the interest of individual economic pursuit. In these cases of Negative freedom, “forced freedom” would not make any sense. However, as demonstrated in this paper, being “forced to be free” is coherent as long as the subject being forced has a Positive conception of freedom.

References

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^[1]SC 1.7.8 refers to book 1, chapter 7, paragraph 8 of *The Social Contract* by Rousseau. (DI) refers to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, and (OC) refers to Rousseau's *Oeuvres Complètes*