

**Liberty as Non-Interference, or Negative Liberty Assignment**

Read the following passages carefully, then answer the questions that follow.

By LIBERTY, is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments: which impediments, may oft take away part of a man's power to do what he would; but cannot hinder him from using the power left him, according as his judgment, and reason shall dictate to him.  
—Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter 14.

LIBERTY, or FREEDOM, signifieth {properly) the absence of opposition; (by opposition, I mean external impediments of motion;) and may be applied no less to irrational, and inanimate creatures, than to rational. For whatsoever is so tied, or environed, as it cannot move, but within a certain space, which space is determined by the opposition of some external body, we say it hath not liberty to go further. And so of all living creatures, whilst they are imprisoned, or restrained, with walls, or chains; and of the water whilst it is kept in by banks, or vessels, that otherwise would spread itself into a larger space, we use to say, they are not at liberty, to move in such manner, as without those external impediments they would. But when the impediment of motion, is in the constitution of the thing itself, we use not to say, it wants the liberty; but the power to move; as when a stone lieth still, or a man is fastened to his bed by sickness.

And according to this proper, and generally received meaning of the word, a FREEMAN, *is he, that in those things, which by his strength*

*and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to.*

—Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter 21

1. What does liberty mean on this account?
2. What kinds of things does this conception of liberty help us to identify as infringements of liberty? What examples does this suggest to you of unfreedom?

Fear and liberty are consistent; as when a man throweth his goods into the sea for *fear* the ship should sink,\* he doth it nevertheless very willingly, and may refuse to do it if he will: it is therefore the action, of one that was *free*: so a man sometimes pays his debt, only for *fear* of imprisonment, which because nobody hindered him from detaining, was the action of a man at *liberty*. And generally all actions which men do in commonwealths, for *fear* of the law, are actions, which the doers had *liberty* to omit.

—Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter 21

3. Do you think Hobbes is right about these examples? Is someone who throws their goods overboard from a boat to prevent it from sinking thereby exercising their freedom? Does someone who pays debts only from fear of being imprisoned act freely? Are we free not to obey the law?
4. Consider why someone might have doubts about these cases. Is something done out of necessity to save one's life, as in the boat example, really done freely?
5. What kinds of things does this conception of liberty leave out or make it harder to see? Consider a few other questions to get at this.
6. According to this account of liberty, does the law that forbids murder infringe on liberty?
7. What about a law making it illegal to sell oneself or one's children into slavery?
8. Would these two example laws overall enhance people's liberty? If so, how? Are you still only using the idea of liberty as non-interference, or is there something else going on here as well?