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“A free society is a community of free beings, bound by the laws of sympathy and by the obligations of family love. It is not a society of people released from all moral constraint—for that is precisely the opposite of a society. Without moral constraint there can be no cooperation, no family commitment, no long-term prospects, no hope of economic, let alone social, order.”

Roger Scruton: “The Limits of Liberty” (2008) *The American Spectator*, <https://spectator.org/> (Dec. 2008)

In this essay I will reflect on what the threats to such a “free” society are, and if it is possible for such a society to exist. Lastly, I will reflect on whether it is necessary for a society to be a free society for it to be a functioning one.

The quote claims that there are two aspects required for a society to be free. Firstly, it must consist of free beings. Secondly, the free beings must be bound by moral constraints, which they must follow, or at least try to follow. Now what would be the necessary conditions for these criteria? The most fundamental criteria seem to be that we are free agents, able to act as we want, and that we are so in a sense that makes us morally responsible for our actions.

The philosopher William Gottfried Leibniz claims that everything that happens is the result of a causal chain of events. The world is deterministic, and therefore we have no free will – we are nothing but a part of the unchangeable chain of events. On the other end of the spectrum, we have those who believe that the course of the universe is yet to be determined, and that we always have the ability to choose otherwise. We have free will and the world is indeterministic, and therefore we are morally responsible for our actions. Lastly, we have compatibilists, those who believe in a deterministic world, as well as in free will. Thomas Hobbes is an example of a compatibilist, claiming that you don’t have the ability to do otherwise, because you will always act in accordance with your desires, and this is true freedom – to act as you want to act. However, this kind of free will makes it hard to include moral responsibility, because since the world is deterministic, your desires are formed as a part of a causal chain, not from within yourself. You may act in accordance with your desires, and Hobbes can claim that this is free will, but you don’t choose your own desires, which makes you free from moral constraints.

We are left with only one view that believe we are morally responsible for our actions, the view that the world is indeterministic, and that we are free agents in this world. To believe in this view, one must accept a few premises. For example, for universal morals to exist, there must exist things that are beyond the physical world, since morals are not physical. Democritus was the first philosopher to doubt this idea. He claimed that everything in the world are simply complex compositions of one thing – the atom. This idea is widely shared in the scientific community, as well as by many philosophers (the idea that everything is made up of smaller physical parts, not necessarily atoms). Does that mean that those who share the physical view of the world are malfunctioning members of a “free society”? If we define a free society as the quote does, then yes. For those who believe in the purely physical world, such a “free world” have never, and can never exist, since morals does not exist, universally, to begin with. Now, if this was true, would society collapse? According to Roger Scruton, it would lead to no cooperation, no family commitment, no long-term prospects, no hope of economic and no

social order. Now, is this the case of those who share the physical view? No, of course not, they are very much functioning members of society. Would this be the case if society consisted only of people who share the physical view? I find it hard to believe so. Now it may be true that such a society is not free, but it can still be a functioning one, unlike Scruton's claim.

Now, what could replace the moral conditions, for such a society to function? First let's tackle an obvious problem. Why aren't those who doesn't believe in universal morals, acting immorally when it is rewarding to do so? Why aren't they ruining the fine society consisting of the members that follow moral conditions? One possibility is simply that they act morally, even though they don't have to. Even if one doesn't believe in universal moral conditions, it can be a good idea to still act in accordance with such conditions. Take human rights for example. Human rights were invented by the United Nations in the 20th century to improve living conditions for everyone. They claim that these rights are universal, but how can that be? Every animal doesn't have their own set of rights, precisely because nature is a ruthless place, where the fittest survives. How can human rights be universal when we evolved from apes, when we ourselves are part of the ruthless nature? It can't be. Yet, human rights have improved countless rights – which is true regardless of whether the rights are universal. It is the same case with other moral conditions. They are often beneficial, even though they are not necessarily true. In extremely rare cases, it may be beneficial for you to murder an innocent person (the reward for the action is higher than the pain it causes and your guilt). If you don't have moral conditions to act in accordance to, why not commit the crime? Well, if we all sign the social contract not to commit murder, no matter the conditions, it will benefit us all in the long run. It will create the society that Scruton describes, with long-term prospects and social order. In the important sense it *is* the society he describes because the moral conditions are followed, and if so, it doesn't make much of a difference whether such a society consists of free beings.

In conclusion, a functioning society does not require free beings, or universal moral conditions, but it does require that moral conditions are followed, regardless of their legitimacy. Such a society is not necessarily the free society that Scruton describes – but whether we have the freedom to act otherwise is not important, because it is just as functioning.

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