The philosophical journey of liberty: from Antiquity to the Age of Revolution

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The term has its origins in the Latin "libertas" and the Greek "eleutheria." Its etymological concept, rooted in its ancient origins, was associated with an individual's condition of having the right to make choices autonomously. Autonomy and liberty are intricately linked and interconnected in philosophy, particularly in the ideas of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle.

For Plato, due to his conception grounded in the notion of the polis, liberty is interpreted as the capacity for self-governance and self-

determination, a state in which individuals can lead their lives according to reason and virtue. This sense of autonomy led Greece to achieve a milestone in the externalization of this individual condition: Athenian democracy. It emerged as a testament that human beings could be self-governed, self-determined, and that this principle could be applied to the polis, echoing Plato's conception of liberty.

Aristotle, on the other hand, as a philosopher who followed the naturalistic current, tied his definitions to the nature of individuals and objects of study and therefore considered liberty the capacity to decide for oneself regarding a certain action or omission. In other words, liberty can be understood as the ability to act in accordance with one's [rational nature](#) and to exercise virtues that lead to well-being and *eudaimonia* (complete happiness). For him, liberty was not a matter of random choice, but the ability to discern and act in line with moral excellence and continuous human development.

For deeper context on Plato, Aristotle, and their two most influential exponents, see our video:

Logically, inhibiting and/or restricting a human being from formally exercising his or her choice inflicts a wound upon their essence. The inability to act according to one's desires and aspirations can lead to feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, as individuals find

themselves prevented from pursuing their goals and interests.

Such a curtailment of liberty diminishes individuals' capacity to make rational decisions and act based on their own reasoning, resulting in a loss of autonomy and independence, and even potentially limiting opportunities for intellectual and emotional growth.

We can deduce, then, that liberty is intrinsically tied to human dignity, and we can observe that the restriction of liberty often causes emotional suffering, feelings of anxiety and hopelessness, and a sense of confinement.

To prevent this reduction in the humanization of beings, through its focus on justice — which, from the Aristotelian perspective, is a virtue intrinsically linked to liberty — law emerged in the Roman Empire as the manifestation of the connection between liberty and human dignity. It became an instrument that secured individuals' rights and attempted to safeguard liberty against arbitrary coercion and abuse of power.

Roman law is renowned for its advanced legal systems encompassing laws, procedures, and hierarchies — an attempt to control the curbing of rights within society and to secure Roman citizens' honor. Law had the role of safeguarding citizens' fundamental matters. It was dedicated to the preservation of rights, and

Roman leaders established institutions like courts and other judicial mechanisms, which, yes, acted in defense of liberty but mainly sought to ensure that any violation would be adequately addressed and judged.

However, just as humans succeeded in defending their innate sense of liberty, they also erred. After its extensive development in Greece and (to a lesser extent) Rome, the notion of liberty was largely forgotten during the subsequent medieval era. During this time, a culture of intense military domination emerged, leading the European population to submit to regimes that caused a decline in both political and individual autonomy, and consigning ancient Greek democratic institutions to history.

Political power was increasingly concentrated in absolute monarchies and autocratic governments. Political rights and active citizen participation were replaced by rigid hierarchical structures that were nearly impossible to ascend. [Totalitarian systems](#) of governance reduced the emphasis on individual liberty as a key element of political life.

The prevalent feudal society of the Middle Ages was also based on hierarchical relationships, such as the lord-vassal relationship, and serfdom. Serfs had little to no liberty because in this context, liberty was perceived as a privilege granted by a position of power or as a spiritual

pursuit, rather than inherent in all human beings.

This reality began to change with a rudimentary version of capitalism, in which the early bourgeoisie started selling excess production from the fiefs in the boroughs. These commercial transactions allowed for a slight accumulation of wealth and a potential rise within society. The bourgeoisie were not nobles (on the contrary, they were often rivals of the nobility), but their revival of trade placed them at wealth levels that unsettled the aristocracy.

For more on the history and origins of libertarianism, see our video with Prof. Peter Jaworski:

Finally, the blazing, desperate flame to heed the call of human nature's longing for liberty emerged, setting Europe ablaze with uprisings and revolutions in what became known as the Age of Enlightenment and the [Industrial Revolution](#).

Through sheer force, a response equal to centuries of curtailed human sentiment was established, toppling from thrones those who believed that merely by wearing a metal circle on their heads, they had the right to deny humans the ability to decide things for themselves.

All this history could be summarized in a few sentences: Humans strive to be free. They will seek to escape any deprivation of liberty in order to return to their rational and virtuous essence. And they revolt (in one form or another) when they're not allowed to be free.

Are you a student interested in getting involved in pro-liberty activism? By applying to join Students For Liberty's Local Coordinator Program, you can be supported in promoting the ideas of liberty while also developing your skills and meeting many like-minded students from across the world. Click on the button below to find out more and get involved!

Are you looking for an opportunity to gain new insights about the ideas of liberty and network with like-minded individuals? Students For Liberty's upcoming [LibertyCon International](), held in **Washington, D.C.**, on **February 2-4, 2024**, is an event you won't want to miss!

LibertyCon International offers an opportunity to engage with top experts, scholars, and entrepreneurs from a variety of fields while providing a platform for attendees to connect with others who are dedicated to advancing pro-liberty ideas and creating a freer future.

Click the button below to sign up for updates and secure your spot at this exciting event. We can't wait to see you there!

This piece solely expresses the opinion of the author and not necessarily the organization as a whole. Students For Liberty is committed to facilitating a broad dialogue for liberty, representing a variety of opinions.

Enzo Duarte

State Coordinator, Students For Liberty

Born in the state of Rio de Janeiro - Brazil, Enzo is an academic pursuing two degrees, Law and Business Administration, at UNIFAA. He became interested in libertarian ideas in 2020 and, in 2022, he started playing important roles in related movements. He began as events director, transitioned to political director,...