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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT: FROM TRADITIONAL SOCIETY TO MODERN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of freedom has evolved significantly from ancient times to the present, reflecting the socio-political transformations of traditional and modern societies. This article explores the philosophical, historical, and cultural dimensions of freedom, tracing its development from ancient Greece and Rome through the medieval period, Enlightenment, and into contemporary debates. Ancient perspectives emphasized collective and inner freedom, while the Enlightenment shifted focus to individual rights and social contracts. Industrialization and modernity introduced economic and political dimensions, further enriching the discourse. In the digital age, freedom faces new challenges such as privacy, surveillance, and global interconnectivity. This study synthesizes contributions from scholars like Aristotle, Locke, Marx, and Sen to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of freedom, offering insights into its enduring relevance in a rapidly changing world.

KEYWORDS

Freedom, ancient philosophy, enlightenment, modern society, digital age, individual rights, collective welfare, surveillance, human development.

INTRODUCTION



The concept of freedom has undergone significant evolution from ancient times to the present, reflecting the socio-political transformations of traditional and modern societies. This progression mirrors humanity's growing awareness of individual and collective autonomy, rights, and responsibilities. Scholars have extensively analyzed this dynamic trajectory, offering profound insights into how freedom has been perceived and redefined across historical epochs. The concept of freedom has undergone a profound evolution from ancient times to the present, shifting dramatically from its understanding within traditional societies to its multifaceted interpretations in modern society. This evolution is intertwined with changes in political structures, philosophical thought, and social organization.

Freedom in Ancient Societies. In ancient societies, freedom was closely tied to the structure and norms of traditional communities. Classical philosophers, particularly in Greece and Rome, laid the foundation for much of the Western discourse on freedom. For instance, Aristotle distinguished between "positive freedom," which involved active participation in the political life of the polis, and "negative freedom," the absence of external constraints. In his *Politics*, Aristotle asserts, "Man is by nature a political animal," emphasizing that true freedom is realized within the framework of a well-governed state. Similarly, the Stoics introduced the idea of inner freedom, a concept

that transcends external conditions. Epictetus, a prominent Stoic philosopher, argued that "Freedom is the ability to live as we wish," highlighting the individual's capacity to maintain autonomy through self-control and rationality. This inward focus on freedom influenced later philosophical traditions, particularly in contexts where external freedoms were restricted. In the Roman Republic, freedom was often defined in terms of citizenship. Marcus Tullius Cicero, in his writings, associated freedom with the rule of law and the absence of tyranny. He stated, "We are in bondage to the law in order that we may be free," suggesting that legal structures were essential to safeguarding individual liberties. In ancient societies, freedom was often understood primarily as freedom from rather than freedom to. This meant primarily freedom from:

Physical bondage or slavery: This was a central concern in many ancient societies, where slavery was a common institution. Freedom meant escaping this condition.

Tyrannical rule: Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle explored the ideal state, often contrasting freedom with arbitrary rule by a tyrant. Freedom in this context was associated with participation in a just political order.

Arbitrary power: The concept of natural law, emerging in various ancient cultures, posited inherent rights and



limitations on the power of rulers, suggesting a form of freedom from unchecked authority.

However, freedom wasn't necessarily understood as individual autonomy. Membership in a community and adherence to its customs often defined a person's place and, consequently, their freedom. Individual freedom was often subordinate to the collective good or the stability of the social order.

Medieval Perspectives on Freedom. The medieval period saw a shift towards understanding freedom within a religious context. Freedom from sin, through divine grace, became a central theme in Christian thought. This spiritual freedom influenced social and political thinking, although it didn't necessarily translate into broader political or social liberties. The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods witnessed a growing emphasis on individual autonomy and reason. The emphasis shifted from freedom from external constraints to freedom to pursue one's own interests and develop one's potential. This was intertwined with the rise of individualism and the decline of feudal structures.

The medieval period introduced a new dimension to the concept of freedom, heavily influenced by religious and feudal systems. Christian theology, as articulated by figures like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, framed freedom within the context of divine will and moral responsibility. Augustine, in his Confessions,

declared, "True freedom is not to follow one's own desires but to follow the will of God," emphasizing spiritual liberation over physical or political autonomy. During this era, freedom was often limited by the hierarchical structures of feudalism. Social roles and obligations defined individual identities, with little room for personal autonomy. However, the Magna Carta of 1215 marked a significant milestone, as it established the principle that even monarchs were subject to the law. Historians like J.C. Holt have described the Magna Carta as "the foundation of constitutional liberty," laying the groundwork for modern legal and political freedoms.

The Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Freedom. The Enlightenment era marked a pivotal shift in the understanding of freedom. Philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant emphasized the importance of reason, individual rights, and social contracts. Locke's Second Treatise of Government argued that individuals are born with natural rights to life, liberty, and property, which governments are established to protect. He asserted, "The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom." Rousseau, in The Social Contract, proposed that freedom is achieved when individuals collectively agree to the general will, ensuring equality and justice. He famously declared, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," critiquing the social inequalities of his time. Kant, in



contrast, viewed freedom as autonomy, the ability to act according to one's rational will. He argued in his Critique of Practical Reason that "Freedom is the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity." The American and French Revolutions were practical manifestations of Enlightenment ideals. The U.S. Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen enshrined the principle that freedom is an inalienable human right. Historian Lynn Hunt has described these documents as "transformative texts that redefined the scope and nature of human rights," influencing subsequent generations.

Modern conceptions of freedom are far more nuanced and complex, encompassing several key dimensions:

Negative freedom: This refers to freedom from external constraints, such as governmental interference, oppression, or coercion. It emphasizes the importance of individual liberty and limited government.

Positive freedom: This emphasizes freedom to act according to one's will and develop one's potential. It requires not only the absence of constraints but also the presence of resources and opportunities that enable individuals to exercise their agency.

Political freedom: This relates to participation in the political process, including the right to vote, free

speech, and assembly. It emphasizes the importance of democratic governance and citizen participation.

Economic freedom: This involves the ability to make economic choices and participate in the market without undue restriction. It's often associated with free markets and capitalism.

Social freedom: This encompasses freedom from discrimination based on factors like race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. It emphasizes equality of opportunity and social justice.

Freedom in the Industrial and Modern Eras. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of modernity introduced new challenges and opportunities for the concept of freedom. On one hand, industrialization expanded economic and social freedoms by creating new opportunities for wealth and mobility. On the other hand, it also led to exploitative labor practices and growing social inequalities, prompting debates about economic justice and workers' rights.

Karl Marx provided a critical analysis of freedom in the context of industrial capitalism. In *Das Kapital*, he argued that true freedom could not exist under systems of exploitation, asserting, "The realm of freedom begins where the realm of necessity is left behind." Marx's ideas influenced labor movements and socialist ideologies, which sought to redefine freedom in terms of collective welfare and economic equality. The 20th century witnessed significant advancements



in political and social freedoms, particularly through decolonization, civil rights movements, and the expansion of democracy. Thinkers like Hannah Arendt emphasized the importance of political participation as a cornerstone of freedom. In her work *The Human Condition*, Arendt wrote, "Freedom, as the *raison d'être* of politics, is not a gift to man but the very essence of human existence."

Contemporary Understandings of Freedom. In contemporary society, freedom is often framed within the contexts of globalization, digital technology, and cultural diversity. Scholars like Amartya Sen have expanded the discourse on freedom by linking it to human development. In *Development as Freedom*, Sen argues that freedom encompasses the ability to achieve well-being and exercise agency. He states, "Freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development."

The rise of the digital age has further complicated the concept of freedom. Issues such as data privacy, surveillance, and misinformation challenge traditional notions of autonomy and free expression. Scholars like Shoshana Zuboff have critiqued the "surveillance capitalism" of the digital economy, warning that it poses "a fundamental threat to democracy and individual freedom." Moreover, contemporary debates often explore the balance between individual and collective freedoms. For example, the global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted tensions between public health

measures and personal liberties. Philosophers like Giorgio Agamben have questioned the implications of emergency measures on civil freedoms, while others argue for the necessity of collective responsibility in safeguarding the common good.

In the 21st century, the concept of freedom continues to evolve. New challenges arise, including concerns about:

- Technological surveillance: The increasing power of technology to monitor and control individuals raises concerns about privacy and freedom.
- Economic inequality: Vast economic disparities can limit the positive freedom of many individuals, hindering their ability to pursue their goals and achieve self-realization.
- Globalization: The interconnectedness of the world presents both opportunities and challenges for freedom, with concerns about national sovereignty and cultural homogenization.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the concept of freedom has undergone a significant transformation from ancient times to the present. From a primarily negative and communal understanding to a more nuanced and individualistic interpretation encompassing various dimensions, the pursuit and definition of freedom remain central to human aspiration and ongoing social and political debate. The challenges posed by modern technology



and global interconnectedness continue to reshape its meaning and significance. The evolution of the concept of freedom reflects humanity's ongoing struggle to reconcile individual autonomy with collective well-being. From the philosophical inquiries of ancient Greece to the political revolutions of the modern era, and the challenges of the digital age, freedom remains a dynamic and contested ideal. As societies continue to evolve, so too will the ways in which freedom is understood, protected, and practiced, guided by the enduring quest for human dignity and justice.

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