

## Blogging at Libertarianism.Org, Part 3: Quantifying Liberty

by [MATT ZWOLINSKI](#) on [JANUARY 23, 2013](#) - [16 COMMENTS](#) - in [LIBERTARIANISM](#), [LIBERTY](#)

My latest post at [Libertarianism.org](#) is up, in which I continue my critique of “maximizing liberty.” In my last post, I argued that the goal of maximizing freedom is an immoral one. In this post, I argue that is incoherent insofar as there is no non-arbitrary way of measuring liberty so as to know whether one society has “more” or “less” freedom than another in purely quantitative terms.

Supposing, for instance, that London has lots of traffic lights that require people to stop on red, but robust protection for civil and religious liberties, while Albania has lots of laws that restrict civil and religious liberties, but few traffic lights. In which society is freedom “greater”?

*How would such a quantitative judgment be made? Should we count up the individual, particular action-tokens that are forbidden in Albania and compare them with the action-tokens that are forbidden in London? If we discovered that, over the course of a year, red lights produce 18,623,545 instances of people being prevented from acting in the way they desire to act, whereas denial of the right to vote produces only 42,658 such instances, would that be sufficient to demonstrate that the red-lights are more freedom-restricting than the denial of political liberty? Or should we be counting not individual action-tokens but more general action-types, i.e. “the right to vote” versus “the right to drive through intersections as one wishes”? And whether we choose types or tokens, just how are we supposed to individuate actions in order to add them up? Is the right to marry the person of your choice one action? Or a shorthand way of describing an enormously large number of discrete actions?*

Along the way, I make the point that some freedoms conflict with others. I do this with a deliberately, and probably distractingly, provocative example: the abolition of slavery. To be sure, I claim, abolition increased the liberty of slaves. But if we understand liberty simply as the absence of interference by others with one’s actions, then we must recognize that abolition decreased the liberty of slave-owners. Prior to abolition, they were free to do control their slaves’ labor, beat them, control their movement, and so on. After abolition, they were not.

Talking about the freedom of slave-owners, understandably, makes people bristle. But the point I’m making is a purely conceptual one, not a normative one. Normatively, of course I think it is a wonderful thing that the freedom of slave-owners was restricted in