

Musk’s “Freedom” & Its Various Meanings Across Culture

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On Wednesday, Tesla CEO tweeted, “Give people their freedom back!” A firestorm of responses has erupted. Rather than add one more opinion to the heated debate that’s ongoing, I thought I’d leave it to our readers to decide — but also to offer some social and historical symbolism of the term “freedom” along the way to help inform these positions.



Musk composed the tweet while also including a link to a *Wall Street Journal* article. That opinion piece posed the idea that lockdowns were not effective in their intent to slow the contagion of COVID-19 in particular areas.

How do Musk's "freedom" statements — speaking primarily about mandatory business closures and the loss of the Tesla Fremont factory production — compare with this and other commonly accepted definitions of freedom?

Musk's "Freedom" Compared to Other Definitions of Liberty

Movement: In a physical sense, freedom is the ability to shift locations and geographic regions without restrictions. Someone who is allowed to be in a place is, to simplify the law, free to be there, physically. **Youth for Human Rights** states two ways that movement must occur for an individual to be considered free.

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their country.

An addendum to these premises includes: "We are sharing with you vital information on how to stay well. We encourage you to share it with your family and friends." The **download** offers ways about health, personal hygiene, sanitizing techniques, isolation strategies, and precautions against outbreaks.

COVID-19 has the health care system at a tipping point, and, although the White House has **advised** all in the US to practice social distancing, which limits physical space between individuals, the number of coronavirus cases and deaths in the US continues to rise. Some governors took stronger action by issuing stay-at-home orders. Some individuals are protesting these restrictions, which include closures of many businesses. As an example, *Fox News* **broadcast** a video this week of Michiganders who protested the state's coronavirus lockdown restrictions before they were forcibly removed.

“ Today’s extraordinary challenges can be seen – and addressed – through the lens of the four freedoms.

freedom of expression

freedom of worship

freedom from want

freedom from fear

Message of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on
#HumanRightsDay, 10 December 2015



OUR RIGHTS
OUR FREEDOMS
ALWAYS
HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2015



www.un.org

Roosevelt’s 4 Freedoms: During World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt cited 4 freedoms that he perceived as under threat and which should be protected as global and universal. In his original speech, Roosevelt defined these freedoms as follows:

- Freedom of speech and expression, everywhere in the world;
- Freedom of every person to worship God in their own way, everywhere in the world;
- Freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understanding that will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants; everywhere in the world; and,
- Freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a

position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor; anywhere in the world.

We might analyze each of these in relation to the current state of world health and economic affairs, but, specifically, has COVID-19 prohibited individuals and companies from pursuing common “economic understanding,” or has the total number of contagions prevented due to restrictions saved lives and actually promoted economic stability in the long-term?

Personal: How do different political and legal systems safeguard personal freedom, defined as the extent to which people can make the choices they want in personal and public life without being dominated by others? Judicial independence plays into personal freedom, described in the *European Journal of Law and Economics* as a means to protect personal freedom against encroachment by political decision-makers.

Do the globally pervasive legal restrictions to assemble at will because of COVID-19 fall into this type of freedom restriction, due to “encroachment by political decision-makers?”

Of the 15 individuals, 9 belong to the sports/ popular culture worlds. None are from the medical or health fields. *Sky News* has an update that commemorates medical and health workers who have died due to COVID-19 — loss of life is the most precious loss of freedom.

Homelessness: Sometimes the issue of homelessness in conjunction with freedom arises. Homelessness raises questions even in regard to the most basic principles of liberty. What legal and moral philosophy should we draw upon to think about homelessness? How should we conceive of it in relation to a value like freedom? It is sometimes said that freedom means little or nothing to a cold and hungry person.

Does the quality of freedom of being homeless have similarity to someone who has been contaminated by a virus with no current existing cure? Does the state of being cold and hungry share features with someone who is suffering from symptoms of the coronavirus? These symptoms are fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, and new loss of taste or smell.

Physical enslavement: Frederick Douglas, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) said:

“And it is most cheering to the friends of freedom ... by the ease with which black humans, scarce one remove from barbarism — if slavery can be honored with such a distinction — vault into the high places of the most advanced and painfully acquired civilization.”

To be enslaved is to have an absolute lack of agency. UNESCO states that slavery is “identified by an element of ownership or control over another’s life, coercion and the restriction of movement and by the fact that someone is not free to leave.” A US State Department archive lists various ways people can be physically enslaved: trafficking/ child sex trafficking, forced labor/ forced

child labor, bonded labor or debt bondage, domestic servitude, and unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers.

How has the coronavirus stay-at-home policy restricted agency? In March, *The Atlantic* **wrote** about the possibility of a police state emerging: “Today, as COVID-19 tears across the globe, signs of authoritarian control are making the jump from fiction to reality.” Amnesty International **described** how various human rights could be violated by governments as a result of the coronavirus: censorship, the right to health, activist harassment, regional crackdown on “fake news,” discrimination and xenophobia, and new border controls. As we can see in these two very different approaches, not all government interventions due to the coronavirus are equal, nor are all enslavements equal even if perceived so by the individual.

Capitalism: The contrast between liberty and the satisfaction of material needs may not have a relation to what one is free or unfree to do. On one side is the information disseminated by the Cato Institute, the magazine *Reason*, Ayn Rand’s novels, and Milton Friedman’s ideology — all of which express rebellious and anti-authoritarian impulses. Another way to look at this is to consider ardent proponents of capitalistic freedom as social activist Noam Chomsky **calls** “extreme advocates of total tyranny.”

Is the right to pursue capitalism contained within the Constitution? If so, to what degree does the right to capitalism take precedence over collective national health?

Final Thoughts about Musk’s “Freedom”

Musk’s frustration is evident this week as he tweets and in the Q1 2020 Tesla conference call with investors and the public at large. He is attempting to uphold profitability heights that no other automaker is able to achieve right now.

As he expresses himself on social media, we must engage in critical thinking — we must distance ourselves from the emotion of this cultural movement in time and consider the consequences of our own speech and actions.

A *New York Times* opinion piece **offers** some interesting background on the historical effects of plagues and can inform us as to our own times.

“For centuries and indeed millenniums, great plagues and other severe shocks have shaped political preferences and decision-making by those in charge. The policy choices that result determine whether inequality rises or falls in response to such calamities. And history teaches us that these choices can change societies in very different ways ...

“Yet the most important lesson of history endures. The impact of any pandemic goes well beyond lives lost and commerce curtailed. Today, America faces a fundamental choice between defending the status quo and embracing progressive change. The current crisis could prompt redistributive

reforms akin to those triggered by the Great Depression and World War II, unless entrenched interests prove too powerful to overcome.”

What kind of “freedom” is Musk celebrating, and do you agree that this is the kind of freedom is necessary right now?