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# Complexity and the Meaning of Freedom:

## *The Instrumentalist View*

By STEVEN R. HICKERSON\*

ABSTRACT. The *technological* and *social* complexities and synergistic interdependencies of our times have rendered the *individualistic, classical liberal* view of *freedom* all but helpless as a guide to intelligent action. An alternative conceptualization is needed. The *instrumentalist* view, founded as it is in the principle of the *continuity of the life process*, provides such an alternative. In contrast with the **negative** "freedom as the absence of coercion" view of the individualists, the instrumentalist views freedom as a **positive** power of *participation* in the framing of rules of right conduct. Such power, in order to be instrumentally effective, must also be founded in the best available warranted knowledge of the potential consequences of alternative patterns of rules. This need for a more expansive and relevant view of freedom comes most forcefully into focus at the interface between powerful, but potentially destructive technologies and the attendant need for their social control.

*We cannot achieve the freedom we seek, unless we comprehend the true significance of freedom in a complex society.* [From *The Great Transformation*]

KARL POLANYI

### I

#### Introduction

HAVING EXAMINED and found wanting the classical liberal view of economic freedom, its competing alternative remains and our task is to explicate the instrumentalist view of freedom in a complex and evolutionary setting. For the instrumentalist, freedom is not a static and unchanging end. Nor is it necessarily a means in a stop and go system of cause and effect relationships. Rather, freedom is part of a complex system, the elements of which are in a common process. As such, it must be viewed in an evolutionary perspective such that our conceptualization of freedom remains reasonably in accord with the complexity of the system, and the potential for unexceptionable synergistic consequences arising throughout the network of interdependencies that that entails. John Dewey, in *The Quest for Certainty*, stated that, "We are free in the degree in which we act knowing what we are about. . . ." <sup>1</sup> His meaning is that it is

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only in the continuing extension and application of instrumentally verified knowledge that freedom is attained. The instrumental logic of Dewey's "knowing what we are about" is critically important for it is here that the continuity principle of the human life process<sup>2</sup> comes face to face with the potential for unexceptionable consequences in a complex environment.

## II

### **The Instrumentalist View**

THE AFOREMENTIONED CONSEQUENCES take a variety of unexpected forms which, in the neoclassical paradigm, have been isolated as "externalities." But this designation of so many of our most pressing problems constitutes an anomaly in neoclassical theory. This anomaly stems from the attribution of scientific and technological causes to the "externality problem" while failing to recognize and come to terms with the embeddedness of the problem in the ceremonial aspects of societal institutions.<sup>3</sup> A critical element in this failure is the obstructionist and classical liberal view of freedom.<sup>4</sup> Uncritical adherence to a view of freedom as something "natural" and innate brings increasingly peculiar results, while the very language and symbolism of orthodoxy shroud the source of this peculiarity in a sort of ceremonial adequacy which makes it invisible to us.

In consciously designing a society in which the individual is accorded maximum freedom, we have deceived ourselves into supposing that the individuals who live in it will in fact be free. . . . Thus we find ourselves in a time of aimless flailing, aware that our freedom is diminishing but uncertain as to the identity of the tyrant or how to depose him.<sup>5</sup>

The instrumentalist view of freedom, in contrast, derives from a very different epistemological orientation. Where the Newtonian economist builds his theories upward from the indissoluble individual as the unit of analysis, the instrumentalist begins at the level of culture. This is not to say that the "individual" is of no concern to the instrumentalist. Rather, he or she is conceived *not* as the product of some imagined "state of nature" but instead as that of a real cultural system of going concerns and socially sanctioned habits and customs. "Thus, instead of isolated individuals in a state of nature they [human beings] are always participants in transactions, . . . members of a concern . . . citizens of an institution."<sup>6</sup> Epistemologically, then, we begin with a picture of life in groups where "individual" characteristics are learned and socially sanctioned, not innate.

Freedom, in this view, is obviously no mere absence of restraint or coercion founded in an artificial dualism of society and the individual. It is, rather, the exercise of informed, discretionary judgment over the qualitative character of

restraints which is founded upon warranted knowledge of the synergistic consequences of our actions in a complex environment. This is *genuine choice*. Such choice is not, and cannot be, in a complex environment, merely a “freedom from” of the type which is a corollary of the Lockean notion of minimal government. It must also include a positive “freedom to” participate in the fashioning of the rules of right conduct. Consider two examples described by John R. Commons:

The “freedom of the city” was not only negatively an immunity from control by surrounding feudal lords and from subjection to other citizens but also positively a participation in the rights, liberties, and powers needed to make one’s will effective in dealing with other citizens. The freedom of the ex-slave was not only that empty immunity from legal subjection to his master provided for in the Thirteenth Amendment of Emancipation from slavery, but also the participation in citizenship provided in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>8</sup>

Commons goes on to say that, “Freedom is power. . . . It is the power of the State in the hands of individuals. . . .”<sup>9</sup> It is in this sense that human beings, members of a community, exercise discretion over the character of restraints. Power, anathema to the neoclassical mind, thus becomes a critical factor; a factor undeniably and inextricably linked to freedom. Power is not the negation of freedom; it is a necessary condition for freedom to be effective. The individualistic view that the dispersal of power enhances freedom is entirely correct. But the faith that *laissez faire* will bring such dispersal to pass is manifestly incorrect, as history has demonstrated. Freedom as the absence of coercion leans as a very thin reed against a very strong gale unless it is coupled with the power to make one’s will effective. This is the meaning in Commons’ statement; this is why the 14th and 15th Amendments were necessary to give substance to the 13th. Thus conceived, freedom implies that, “. . . individuals are empowered to participate with others in framing the rules, passing the laws, modifying customs, and realigning accepted practices.”<sup>10</sup>

But what has this connection of freedom and power got to do with complexity and the meaning of freedom? This question returns our focus to the role of warranted knowledge in freedom as part of a process. Conceived as the power of participation in the framing of rules, freedom requires that this involvement be founded upon reliable knowledge. This knowledge requirement expands in proportion with ever increasing societal and technological complexities, and the potential consequences thereof. Free peoples continuously redefine the meaning and terms of their own freedom in light of new knowledge about themselves, their institutions, their environment, and the potential for both beneficial and harmful consequences which is embodied in the state of scientific and technological development. Freedom, then, is meaningful only in conjunction with power. But power is effective for instrumental purposes only to

the extent that it is supported by warranted knowledge of complexity as a means of appraising the character and consequences of alternative patterns of rules.

To the instrumentalist, then, freedom obtains with meaningful and informed participation in the rule-making process. The matrix of rules which sets the prevailing pattern of permissions, obligations, and prohibitions is no divinely inspired system of natural laws. It is, rather, continuously developmental. The content of the matrix is constantly under adjustment, reform, and change in response to societal and technological exigencies. Thus its specific configuration at any particular time is *in part* a function of technological requirements. In relation to freedom and the rule-making process these requirements work in each of two ways.

In the first sense the technological process itself is broadly conducive to freedom as it expands the range of human potential and activities. This, of course, was Ayres' meaning in *Toward a Reasonable Society*.

Freedom is a function of the technological process, and as such it is a community function. . . . Such a statement is symbolic, of course. Freedom is not in any literal sense machine-made. It is rather a function of the process that runs through all the fabricating activities of all mankind . . . the technological process. . . . What the machine symbolizes, therefore, is the vast area that is now included within the boundaries of the possible. . . . In seeking to extend the limits of the possible, we have sought freedom. . . .<sup>11</sup>

And, in fact, we do become more free as knowledge, technology, and "the possible" expand; while ignorance, superstition, fear, and disease contract.

But this is not the totality of Ayres' instrumentalism, and it is a failure to recognize this fact which leads many of his interpreters astray. There is another side to the technological process; a darker side of which Ayres was well aware, and which represents the second sense in which technological requirements impose themselves on freedom and the rule-making process. Today, of course, we are all aware of this darker side as it is continually replayed with each new revelation about environmental degradation, chemical dumping, the hazards of nuclear wastes, the spectre of nuclear holocaust, the carcinogenic contamination of the food chain, the technological extraction of nutrients from our annual harvest, and so forth. This is where the "other side of Ayres" must now begin to force itself upon us. As Anne Mayhew has stated,

If the source of human progress resides in the *process* of instrumental valuing rather than technology as artifacts, then it is the *evaluation of the consequences* of any particular use of a tool that is progressive. Ceremonialism is a failure to evaluate by testing consequences.<sup>12</sup>

Avoidance of this ceremonialism requires the realignment and adjustment of the matrix of rules; better known, perhaps, as "regulation" or "intervention." This is the sense in which freedom is to be understood as an element of a

process which must remain in accord with the complexity of the system as a whole. This is also the sense in which government, far from being the enemy of freedom, is in fact the instrumentality of freedom; that is, the forum (in potential if not in present fact) for meaningful, genuine, and informed participation in the realignment and adjustment of the matrix of rules.

This is also the meaning of our assertion that Dewey's "knowing what we are about" involves the extension and application of instrumentally verified knowledge. That this is necessarily a cooperative venture is implicit in the very character of the technological process. Dewey's thesis is that ". . . the operation of cooperative intelligence as displayed in science is a working model of the union of freedom and authority."<sup>13</sup>

What is pertinent, what is deeply significant to the theme of the *relation* between collective authority and freedom, is that the progress of intelligence . . . exhibits their organic, effective union. . . . The contribution the scientific inquirer makes is collectively tested and developed and, in the measure that it is cooperatively confirmed, becomes a part of the common fund of the intellectual commonwealth. . . . The contrast between the limited scope of its use and the possible range of its applications to human relations—political, economic, and moral—is outstanding and depressing. It is this very contrast that defines the great problem that still has to be solved. . . . The great tragedy of the individualistic movement is that it misconceived and misplaced the source and seat of this principle of freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Dewey's point encompasses both senses in which the matrix is, partially, a function of technological requirements. Regarding the first sense, Dewey clearly recognizes the contribution of embodied cooperative intelligence to the elimination of want and suffering. With respect to the second sense, Dewey calls for the application of this self-same method to the evaluation of consequences. The extent to which the matrix of rules is a product of the application of this method to the evaluation of consequences is the extent to which those rules perform an instrumental, freedom-enhancing function in society.

But, as we have said, the matrix of rules is only partially a function of technological requirements; and only partially a function of the application of cooperative intelligence to the evaluation of consequences. It is also, in part, a function of the structure of power and the pattern of status deference in society. This is ceremonialism.

We have already noted that power is necessary in order for freedom to be substantial. This is a requirement for effective participation in the rule-making process. But when power is concentrated in the hands of the few this process, and the resulting matrix of rules, becomes a symbolic mockery of democratic principles and genuine freedom as defined here. Economists (and others) of all stripes regard the concentration of power with justified trepidation. But one mark of differentiation among different schools of economic thought is the

predominant perception of where power is, or is likely to become, concentrated, and to what effect.<sup>15</sup> The *where, how, and societal implications* of power become a vital empirical concern.

The social task is to distinguish between different possessors and uses and therefore between different alternative checking possibilities. The ultimate normative task, in this context, is to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable power.<sup>16</sup>

This paper is not the place for a full-scale foray into these concerns.<sup>17</sup> We do, however, offer a couple of observations regarding their relationship to the instrumentalist view of freedom. Freedom, once again, involves the extension and application of instrumentally verified knowledge to the evaluation of consequences. Where people are genuinely free, this takes place in the context of meaningful and informed participation by all in the rule-making process; that is, freedom is the power of participation. An examination of the structure of the matrix of rules, then, aids in the task of identifying the possessors and uses of power. The extent to which the matrix is skewed, asymmetrical, or biased toward some favored group is the extent to which it is ceremonial in character; a function of concentrated power rather than of freedom as informed participation by all.

An examination of the specific rules of which this structure consists aids in the second, normative, task of identifying acceptable and unacceptable uses of power. Power there must always be. This is the cold fact of the economy and the polity. But, is power used to the effect of the continuity of life and the application of instrumental knowledge; or instead to the effect of preserving hierarchical position and status deference, and the extension of life threatening (but profitable) technologies to the exclusion of those which are proven safe and effective? The tragic answer, we believe, is clear. And it stems from a misconceived view of freedom.

### III

#### **Conclusion: So What?**

THE PRESENT AUTHOR was never one of Clarence Ayres' students. He has it on good authority though, that one of Ayres' favorite questions was "So what?" Or, to put it another way, "Why is this important?" The usefulness of the foregoing discussion is seriously compromised if we fail to address this question. If we think of the instrumentalist view of freedom, metaphorically, as a horse, then the question is 'how far can this conceptual horse carry us into the realm of real problems—messy and confusing as they actually are?' Let us try to offer a few remarks, hopefully cogent, on this score.

In 1977 the National Science Foundation published the results of a study

entitled, *Assessment of Future National and International Problems*.<sup>18</sup> The intent was to focus attention on a group of serious, but, perhaps, little known problems exclusive of the well known areas of food, energy, and the environment. The result was a list of 41 problem areas, one of which was referred to as, "the growing conflict between central control and individual freedom." The upshot of this concern stems from the relationship between powerful technologies and the attendant necessity of their social control. Economist Ezra J. Mishan has considered this relationship and noted the following critical areas which exemplify the problem: The Computer Revolution, The Internal Combustion Engine, The Rise of Toxic Technology, Technology in the Service of Crime, the Techno-Military Spiral, and Atoms for Peace.<sup>19</sup> These areas, and others, obviously carry tremendous potential for environmental destruction and societal dislocation. The ingenuity and sensitivity with which we confront such problems, or fail to confront them, is in no small degree determined by the conceptualization of freedom which molds the contours of thought.

If we adhere, in fundamentalist fashion, to an antiquated view of freedom, an intelligent approach to problems such as these is rendered impossible. If we think of freedom as a process which must remain in accord with the complexities of the system, intelligent action may yet prevail. We close, as we began, with Karl Polanyi's insightful admonition. "We cannot achieve the freedom we seek, unless we comprehend the true significance of freedom in a complex society."<sup>20</sup>

#### Notes

1. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929) (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960), p. 250.
2. Louis J. Junker, "Instrumentalism, the Principle of Continuity and the Life Process," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (October, 1981).
3. James A. Swaney, "Externality and Community," *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September, 1981).
4. Steven R. Hickerson, "Complexity and the Meaning of Freedom: the Classical Liberal View," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (January, 1984).
5. George C. Lodge, *The New American Ideology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 164.
6. John R. Commons, *Institutional Economics*, Vol. 1 (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1961), pp. 73-74.
7. Marc Tool, *The Discretionary Economy: A Normative Theory of Political Economy* (Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear, 1979), p. 320.
8. John R. Commons, *Legal Foundations of Capitalism* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1968), p. 119.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.
10. Marc Tool, "Constructs of Value, Freedom and Equality in Institutional Economics," *Social Science Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January, 1978), p. 34.



11. Ayres, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
12. Anne Mayhew, "Ayresian Technology, Technological Reasoning, and Doomsday," *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June, 1981), p. 515.
13. John Dewey, "Science and the Future of Society," in Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: Modern Library, 1939), p. 360.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 358-62.
15. See, for example, Warren J. Samuels, "Further Limits to Chicago School Doctrine," in Warren J. Samuels, ed., *The Chicago School of Political Economy* (East Lansing: Association for Evolutionary Economics and Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, Michigan State University, 1976), pp. 426-28.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 426.
17. John K. Galbraith is, of course, well known for the examination of power in his major works. Other suggested works in this area include: Adolf A. Berle, *Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967); Seymour Melman, *The Permanent War Economy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); Arthur Selwyn Miller, *The Modern Corporate State: Private Governments and the American Constitution* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956); Wallace C. Peterson, *Our Overloaded Economy: Inflation, Unemployment and the Crisis in American Capitalism* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1982); and Warren J. Samuels, ed., *The Economy as a System of Power* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979).
18. National Science Foundation, *Assessment of Future National and International Problems*, Vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, February, 1977).
19. Ezra J. Mishan, "The Folklore of the Market: An Inquiry into the Economic Doctrines of the Chicago School," in Warren J. Samuels, ed., (1976), pp. 146-48.
20. Polanyi, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

### ***On the Proposed Department of Trade***

THE HUGE TRADE DEFICIT of the United States and the increasing competition from foreign manufacturers and suppliers have brought foreign trade issues to the fore in the U.S. As a result, the U.S. Congress is studying legislative proposals that would reorder trade functions within the executive branch and establish a new Department of Trade. These need to be studied carefully, because, under the guise of reorganization and more efficient administration, special protectionist interests can maneuver for private advantage which would disadvantage the public. An aid in this is an American Enterprise Institute publication, "Legislative Proposals to Establish a Department of Trade" (Washington and London: The Institute, May, 1984).