

Is There a Trade-off Between Freedom and Safety? A Philosophical Contribution to a Covid-19 Related Discussion

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The aim of the present paper is to critically discuss the common claim that in times of the Covid-19 pandemic there is a trade-off between freedom and safety when it comes to measures taken by authorities to ban the virus. In order to approach the question of whether or not this claim is justified a distinction is made between a more or less common economic view of reality and a philosophical interrogation of the assumptions underlying economic reality. Thus, the paper provides two insights. First, that the economic concept of trade-off is not appropriate for a reflection on freedom and human dignity. Second, in the light of classical philosophical notions of freedom, the implicit or explicit understanding of freedom in the economic domain turns out to be insufficient. This is why the paper argues that the perception of the mentioned trade-off as such is already a severe, albeit inconspicuous, threat of freedom.

Keywords: ethics, economics, freedom, trade-off, safety, assumptions of economic reality

Introduction

The current Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly a global phenomenon. A sign of this is that not only the framework of the understanding of the medical causes but also the framework of the understanding of the overall consequences seems to be shared and taken for granted on a global scale. One of these consequences—and one of the most discussed ones—is that the restrictions taken by authorities in order to ban the virus producing inevitably a trade-off between freedom and safety, notable of health safety; in other words, granting more freedom means providing less (health-) safety and vice versa. There is a consensus in the discussions that this trade-off can pose a serious threat to human dignity and human rights, in that freedom is generally seen as the indispensable foundation of human dignity, while safety, on the other hand, is considered a basic need that serves as a condition for freedom and therefore, in turn, is a fundamental human right. Since the concept of trade-off and the understanding of basic needs as conditions for freedom are key concepts of an economic view of reality, it seems that the realm of economic reality is the most natural to discuss these issues. However, and despite the global consensus, a more attentive philosophical interrogation of the premises and assumptions underlying economic reality reveals two things. First, economic concepts are not appropriate when it comes to respecting freedom and human dignity as such. Second, in the light of classical philosophical notions of freedom, the implicit or explicit understanding of freedom in the economic domain turns out to be insufficient. That is why, I argue, that the perception of the mentioned trade-off is, as such, already a severe

albeit inconspicuous threat of freedom. At the same time, it can be shown that there are other serious threats to human freedom on a more general level and beyond the current crisis.

In this paper, therefore, I will, first, reconsider the role and the function of the concept of trade-off in economics and lay open the underlying assumptions. Second, I want to show why this concept cannot serve as a sufficient ground when it comes to assessments concerning human dignity and freedom. Finally, I suggest that the philosophical notion of absolute freedom is more apt for understanding the phenomenon of freedom itself.

The Concept of Trade-off in Economics

In economics, the world is generally thought of as a given stock of limited or scarce resources. It is the fundamental belief of economists that these resources ought to produce the highest level of wealth. Hence, every economic action, and indeed, everything that happens in the economic realm, must be understood in terms of serving this purpose—and this purpose alone. We know this economic framework as the rule of efficiency. One of its key elements is the concept of trade-off. This concept is central to the rule of efficiency in that it sets up its operational dimension, i.e., the potential to be implemented in operations and the potential for other concepts to operate with trade-offs in functional relations.

The groundbreaking importance of the concept of trade-off in modern economics (even though it was fundamental already before that) has been laid out by Lionell Robbins in his *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Sciences* that appeared in 1932. In this essay, Robbins (1932) defined the notion of trade-off by saying that “[t]he time and the means for achieving”, let us say, any kind of ends, “are at once limited and of alternative application” (p. 13). This, he maintains, is “typical of the whole field of Economic Studies” (p. 12). This principle, as we can call it, is constitutive of economic reality up until today. One of the major and most commonly used economic textbooks worldwide, the standard work by Harvard professor, Gregory Mankiw (2016), defined it as *the* first principle of economics (p. 4). Nobel Prize laureate Paul Samuelson in his classic *Economics*, the best-selling economics textbook for decades, introduces the concept of trade-off on the very first pages in a specially highlighted box (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2001, p. 13).

In order to explain what a trade-off is, economists refer to it in terms of opportunity costs. Opportunity costs are a theoretical conception that allows to assign a value to any kind of resource. This is essential because the efficiency rule of economics calculates with everything as a value, be it any kind of desired end or the means and the time to achieve it. However, values are not naturally given but comparatively constructed, each time anew and each time for a particular purpose. This is where opportunity costs come in. They represent the assumed price, i.e., the value, of a resource that *could be* used theoretically in a different way from that in which it *is* used in reality, or instead of another resource that *is* used in reality. One way to determine the trade-off of a production process, following the textbook by Krugman and Obstfeld (2000), would be the following: “The opportunity cost of roses in terms of computers is the number of computers that could have been produced with the resources used to produce a given number of roses” (p. 12). The formulation “in terms of” is crucial because it shows the comparative nature of opportunity costs and also that there are almost infinite possible trade-offs and opportunity costs for one and the same thing. Hence, we see how trade-offs and opportunity costs serve a particular purpose in a particular situation, in this case, the evaluation of the efficiency of changing the production from roses to computers. More generally speaking, the concept of trade-off is a means to evaluate and direct choices and decisions in order to adjust the allocation of resources to the general rule of efficiency. This is, of course, also true for non-material resources. One non-material resource,

however, stands out against all others as it does not only allow for an alternative application but is the ultimate condition that allows for any kind of application and any kind of alternative in the first place. Obviously, this is time. In economics, one of the most fundamental trade-offs is the so called trade-off of time¹ which is based on the assumption that time is a resource and that it can be applied either to work or to leisure. Even though in everyday life, it appears to be evident and almost natural that “the wage rate is the opportunity cost of leisure” (Varian, 1990, p. 172), this holds true only insofar as the underlying assumptions are not called into question.

As we have seen, the concept of trade-off is a cornerstone of economic thinking. Many, if not most of the basic elements out of the economics toolbox, e.g., production possibility frontiers, comparative advantage, the Edgeworth box, rates of substitution, budget lines, etc. directly rely on this key concept as it allows for their definition and use. Obviously, the claim of the inevitable trade-off between freedom and safety during the pandemic belongs into the dimension of the economic framework of reality. In order to see whether this perspective is justified, it is necessary to reconsider the underlying assumptions in a perspective that is not explicitly taken into account within the sphere of economic reality.

The General Condition and the Underlying Assumptions of Economic Reality

The General Condition

In the next step, we will determine three general assumptions that constitute the economic framework of reality. All assumptions, however, are embedded in one original and overall ruling condition: scarcity. Independent of whether economics thinks about an economy, the world, reality, nature, or the universe, and no matter how great the abundance that characterises these spheres, any such sphere appears as a totality, i.e., as an aggregate or a sum, comprising a finite number of entities. However, scarcity as such is not the object of investigation. Rather, scarcity is seen as the malady that impedes the fulfillment of (potentially unlimited) needs and for which economics provides the remedy (Malthus, 1798/1973).² Economics in this sense is a moral operation, so to speak, that is set out to abolish misery and spread happiness all over the world. It does so by striving to increase the controllability of given resources. It is clear, though not altogether obvious and not at all transparent within economics itself, that this theoretical conception that conceives of everything constitutively in terms of limitation, constraint, and impediment, must be driven by a power that is in itself directed toward overcoming these conditions of misery. In other words, “optimal” economic reality is the aspirational target that replaces a given flawed, or insufficient, reality. Even though any “new reality” might be less flawed than the previous one, it will still represent a state of deficiency. Hence, economic reality implies a process of ongoing replacements of deficient dimensions of value and power with ever more less deficient and more controllable ones.

Three Assumptions

The first assumption that constitutes economic reality is that there is *a permanent availability of everything as a resource, defined in terms of value*. That everything is a resource means that everything, be it material or non-material, must be able to produce a certain effect (while being itself the effect of something else). Thus, everything appears in the light of the power of producing effects. The only meaningful quality that can be assigned to an effect is the impact, or the potential impact, on other resources. The quality of impacts

¹ Cf. n. 3.

² In Malthus’ *Principle of Population* from 1798 the notorious “checks to population” are a telling example of what thinking in terms of malady and remedy implies.

can, of course, be quite different, e.g., monetary impacts, physical impacts, and psychological impacts. However, this quality is not primarily relevant. What counts in the first place is the extent of impacts and the mechanics of their interdependency. In other words, any quality of a resource is justified solely in terms of quantity. The general format that safeguards indistinctively the quantitative reality of potential and actual impacts of resources is what we call *value*. Values represent potential and actual impacts of effects. Hence, economic reality is a reality where everything appears in terms of values. Since there is no sufficient inner quality or measure of a resource, values are determined in reference to, and comparison with, potential and actual impacts of other resources. Therefore, as soon as the general format of value is superimposed, so to speak, upon a thing, the entire reality appears necessarily as an exclusive domain of comparative and reference values. Permanent availability of everything as a resource, therefore, does not mean that everything is at any time at one's disposal, but that everything appears exclusively as a resource with the prevailing relation being calculation and computation.

The second assumption is *the unlimited substitutability of values*. The only way of assigning values to any kind of resource is by using comparative or reference values of other resources. As we have seen, this is known as opportunity costs, which is the operation behind the concept of trade-off. However, the idea of trading one thing for one another and, hence, replacing one thing with another is not at all an invention of Modern economics but probably as old as mankind itself. But, first, the Modern economic substitutability is an operation under the rule of value, which means that what is being traded is not one *thing* for another *thing*. Rather, it is the implementation of values within a computational process. Second, the possible replacement of one thing with another always used to occur within limits set by and within a particular sense-dimension constituted from out of (and as) a whole—the “whole of wholes” being what we call the world. Within economic reality, however, the substitutability of values is, at least theoretically, unlimited. What is at stake here philosophically is how particular things can obtain and maintain their particular and unique sense. In other words, how each and every thing can *be* what it *is*. Aristotle, for example, discusses this problem in his *Politics* (Aristotle, 1257). He points out that using shoes for trading with food is not what shoes are meant *to be*. Hence, in order for such trading to “make sense” it has to be put within meaningful limits in the light of a particular sense-dimension. For Aristotle, this sense-dimension is the so-called autarchy of the polis. The latter is, in this case, the sense- and measure-giving whole, while autarchy is a constitutive trait of the polis itself. Generally speaking, it has always been the understanding of philosophy to sustain the sense of beings through grounding them in a sense-dimension (a whole), which, in turn, needs to be grounded in the first place. In economic reality, on the other hand, everything is indistinctively conceived of as a resource, hence there is no need to sustain a particular thing in what it is. While for Aristotle, a shoe *is* firstly and ultimately a shoe, and the sense of food is *to be* food, in economic reality, both a shoe and food are substitutable resources (Smith, 1776/1976, p. 54).³ There is no sense-dimension beyond the computational framework in which shoes and food can be substituted for each other.

The third assumption is that *all human action consists in the implicit or explicit computation of possible returns in value*. We said before that economic reality is an ongoing process of replacing states of less overall value with states of more overall value and higher levels of controllability of given resources. The purpose of

³ The value paradox by Adam Smith which makes a difference between “value in use” and “value in exchange” is a remnant of the original philosophical concern about the sustaining of the essence of beings.

the human being is seen in his or her being capable of devising, directing, and executing this process—ultimately, it is assumed, for the sake of the implementation of freedom. The distinguishing nature of human beings is the faculty of reason (Simon, 2016). Reason is, in the first place, the power to order and combine the bulk of given chaotic sense data into a coherent reality. This is done by establishing causal connections and quantitative comparisons within the already preestablished horizon of resources, their effects and potential impacts. Reason, then, is the driving force of an astonishing progress in the history of humankind. As the Western civilization develops, human beings become more and more rational agents and, thus, become more and more able to seize control over reality. They discover, as we already said, the potential of reason to replace the flawed reality by a less flawed reality, and this in a predictable kind of way. It is in the Age of Enlightenment, namely with the birth of economics as a science, when this development becomes explicitly a moral operation. The driving intention of this science is to further and foster man's pursuit of happiness by means of the modern scientific methods of mathematical mechanics. As we have pointed out, according to the general condition of scarcity the immediate situation in which man finds himself, the natural condition in which he is born, is a situation of unfreedom. Because of the limitations and constraints of reality, he cannot freely dispose of all the resources he wants to. His time, therefore, is occupied with work and he can enjoy only little or no leisure. In short, time as well as means is lacking to overcome the basic and purely "economic" needs and devote oneself to the more noble and sublime needs of, for instance, philosophising about morality and freedom. Hence, man must engage in economic activity, i.e., follow the rule of efficiency, because this guarantees more overall value and higher levels of controllability of given resources. Consequently, if man acts and behaves as a rational agent, implementing the process of economic reality, there will be gradually more resources at his disposal and the work-leisure ratio will improve in favour for more leisure. It is a fundamental belief of economists, as part of a more general Modern belief in progress, that at the same time a transition takes place from a state of unfreedom where man's time is occupied almost entirely with the instinct-driven fulfilment of basic needs, to a state where freedom prevails and man's moral nature fully unfolds. The transition is marked by the fact that basic needs are gradually satisfied, leaving time and space for other, supposedly higher needs (Keynes, 1930/1963; De Gennaro, 2020).

The Economic Reality of Freedom and Safety

However, underlying this transition, there is in fact only *one* uniform reality, in this case economic reality. Ontologically speaking, this unique reality is homogeneously ruled by scarcity, trade-offs, opportunity costs, rational behavior, etc. Therefore, the fact that, once unfreedom is overcome, I am free to choose philosophising over fishing and listening to music over factory work implies a calculation of the opportunity cost of one in terms of the other. Hence, notwithstanding the undeniable differences between different kinds of activities, the human being is constantly engaged in one and the same computational operation:⁴ Even if one does not have to worry about food anymore, ontologically there is still an opportunity cost of meditating in terms of working for food (for instance, in order to increase safety in this respect). In more general terms, the difference between unfreedom and freedom may be huge, yet, within the framework we are considering, it is not a difference in kind. This is inevitably and necessarily so, because, as we have mentioned at the beginning, all operations and the assumptions they are based on make use of time. The original phenomenon of time, which, for reasons of space, we will simply call "the time of freedom", is thereby overlooked and time itself is used as an operable

⁴ There is no doubt that, especially from a historical point of view, occupations have changes and have become less harder and that the manner of how we are occupied is in general a serious matter.

entity, i.e., a scarce resource: “time for x” has an opportunity cost in terms of “time for y”. Therefore, the distinction between economic needs and supposedly “higher” non-economic needs is only declared and assumed as an operational device.

It thus becomes clear that the world as it appears within the framework of economic reality is, again, ontologically homogeneous, i.e., there is a continuity of substitution because economic needs, and basic needs in general, are in fact on the same level as non-economic needs. Hence, both spheres necessarily “invade” and penetrate each other. This finally explains the possibility of the claim that there is a trade-off between freedom and the basic need of (health-) safety. In other words, it explains how it can appear that “more freedom” can imply “less safety” and vice versa.

The fact that this claim and the concerns that go along with it belong into the global phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to suggest that the ruling global reality is the economic reality, or, in any case, a reality based on the same fundamental assumptions.

The Philosophical Notion of Absolute Freedom

As has been pointed out so far, economic reality does not allow for a notion of freedom where freedom *itself* prevails as the setting free of a unique and self-contained dimension (i.e., a space of time) which is different in kind from the reality where conditions of unfreedom rule. Since freedom can be attained only by implementing operations under conditions of unfreedom, both freedom and unfreedom remain necessarily within one and the same dimension.

In contrast to that, the modern philosophical tradition sheds an entirely different light on the question of freedom. As the new foundation of the principles of knowledge as such sets forth in philosophy at the beginning of modernity, it soon becomes clear that a one-dimensional conception of reality cannot be sufficient when it comes to sustaining freedom itself. Hence, it is argued, there must be two spheres that together constitute the whole of what is and that are independent of each other while at the same time being related to each other. Leibniz (1714/2002), for example, introduced these two spheres as “the reign of physics” and “the reign of grace” in his *Mondadology* (p. 48), whereas Kant (1785/1999), in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, determined them as “the realm of nature” and “the realm of ends” (p. 59). The realm of nature is the world based on empirical evidence and causality, the sphere of scientific knowledge and technical utilisation of things. Clearly, this is the ontological horizon of the moral operation that constitutes economic reality, which, for our purposes, we call “immediate” or “given” reality.

However, philosophical investigations show that the legitimacy of the laws of nature as they apply within this dimension cannot be grounded within the limits of that dimension itself. While its manifold reality is based on axioms and hypotheses which are the foundations of scientific proof and evidence, and therefore also the foundations of the technical utilisation of the world, the axioms and hypotheses themselves must have a ground that is independent from this dimension and located in a different domain (De Gennaro, 2019).⁵ Otherwise, the ground of proof and evidence itself would depend on what is supposed to be proven and provided evidence for. In other words, the immediate or given reality does not, as such, constitute a world as a whole. Since, as has been said before, a sense-dimension originates only from out of and as a whole, sense (in this particular

⁵ For Leibniz, this ground is the *sufficient* reason and the principle of *convenience* that it implies. Consequently, he “states that he couldn’t have discovered the laws of physics which he did find without taking as an initial reference the principle of *convenience*”.

philosophical meaning) remains implicit, i.e., cannot unfold itself, as long as the exclusive rule of the given reality is not called into question and interrogated with regard to the already mentioned difference in kind. What is needed for a sufficient understanding of the world is a singular and unique difference,⁶ which is sustained and preserved in a peculiar form of human awareness, i.e., philosophical interrogation.

It is one of the most remarkable findings of modern philosophy (Kant, 1781/1998)⁷ to have shown that it is the question of the world as a whole, i.e., the independence of the ground of reality along with the need to transcend the given reality in order for the one difference to appear, that gives rise to the question of freedom. To put it in a more unusual terminology, in philosophy, freedom is an ontological question, namely the question of the world *being* one and the same whole. Thus, we can gather that “freedom” and “sense” are, in a sense, the same.⁸ Consequently, a world without freedom is a world without sense, and vice versa. Furthermore, it is clear that freedom and sense cannot depend on any instance of a given reality. Freedom, as we find it elucidated, for example, in the works of Schelling (1806/1997) and Hegel (1807/1986) must be understood as “absolute freedom”.⁹ Hence, we begin to understand that freedom does not belong to or depend on the particular being of man, much rather we can say that man belongs to freedom in his being or essence. This independence of freedom in its constitutive relation to man’s being is the sole origin of human dignity. In fact, the dignity of human being consists, in the first place, in his being in between the two dimensions that constitute the world as a whole, and sustaining the difference which is constitutive of the whole itself.

Even though man is first and foremost thrown in the immediate and given reality of the world, which is the sphere where unfreedom rules, it is not conceivable that “at some later point (in time)” this state is replaced by a supposed state of freedom. Why not? First, because absolute freedom is untouchable by any determination of “before” and “later”; otherwise, it could not be unique and self-contained. Second, because, as the “realm of freedom” is different in kind, it cannot be another “reality”. In fact, the category “state” does not at all apply to it. Rather, freedom is the breaking of sense *into* reality, or the breaking of a reality *through* sense. But why is there not a “free reality” in the first place? Because then there would be no difference at all, and, therefore, no freedom. Since freedom is an originating, a setting free, there has to be an instance that lets the breaking of freedom happen, that is itself essentially open for, and in its turn holds open, the possibility for freedom to break. *This instance is the reality of being human.* In fact, this is what philosophy has called since its beginning: *ethos*.¹⁰ Of course, it does matter how a humanity understands and shapes reality. Neither can human beings arrange conditions of reality such that freedom follows automatically, nor is the human being completely detached from the possible break of freedom. As long as unfreedom rules in the one-dimensional immediate reality, there is no space and no time for freedom to break.¹¹ As long as freedom does not break, even though there is an openness (an *ethos*), that allows for freedom to break, freedom remains a blurry and treacherous promise. On the other hand, unfreedom could not rule as exclusively as it does without that openness for

⁶ One whose uniqueness is itself one of a kind.

⁷ The first clear breakthrough is the so-called antinomies in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1781/1998, p. 548).

⁸ This is not to say that they are interchangeable concepts. Rather (to adopt the terminology I have been using in this essay) they are of the same kind.

⁹ It is noteworthy that in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* “absolute freedom” appears as a stage of liberation from utility (*Nützlichkeit*) (Hegel, 1807/1986, p. 431).

¹⁰ Hence, think of ethics as a moral operation is a misconception resulting from an insufficient clarification of underlying assumptions.

¹¹ In other words, as long as time is conceived of as a resource with its opportunity costs there can be no freedom.

freedom.¹² If freedom breaks into an openness (an *ethos*) that allows for that breaking, and if that breaking itself is borne and preserved in human awareness and action, then freedom and reality—held together by the uniquely unique difference—will be one and the same.

If we finally relate these philosophical considerations back to our discussion of the threat of a trade-off between freedom and safety, we can say the following. Since freedom is “absolute”, it can in principle not be defined in terms of the availability of resources or the satisfaction of needs. Ontologically speaking, man *is* free because freedom consists in *being* free. There is no initial situation—a so-called “natural condition” in which man is born—characterized by a lack of freedom. Rather, the initial situation of man is that of a free being that struggles for ways of holding open the possibility for freedom to break, ways in which freedom is sustained, but which do not define freedom and are not identical with it. Freedom is to give oneself up to the extemporaneous breaking of time itself as the dimension for the arising of a word.¹³ With respect to the above-discussed trade-off of time in the economic reality, which determines the cost of work and leisure, from a philosophical viz. ontological point of view we can say that, because man *is* free, he *is* in leisure, i.e., in the time of freedom. If one is free to choose philosophising over fishing or listening to music over factory work, this is the unique decision to effortlessly await an appearance of sense in time. The *measure* for these ways and the work and effort that go together with it in order to be given up in the right time, hence what appears as “conditions” in terms of satisfaction of economic and other basic needs (including health), is drawn from freedom itself. In other words, there is no trade-off within the interplay of these different needs because the decision to fulfill one and renounce another serves from the outset as a way of sustaining the openness for freedom. Thus, I can *freely* decide to change the measure of certain ways to sustain the openness for freedom—e.g., mobility, privacy, etc.—in order to safeguard other ways—e.g., health—according to my “sense of freedom”. The measure of this renunciation (how much, in what way, for how long, etc.) is, in turn, derived from freedom itself.

Conclusion

We have seen that from a philosophical point of view there is, properly speaking, no trade-off between freedom and (health-) safety. Even though the right of security and the right for health are undoubtedly legitimate human rights, they are not at the same level as freedom and human dignity. Much rather, they are different ways of holding open and preserving the possibility for freedom as the breaking of sense into reality (again, with freedom being the sole origin of human dignity).

The perception, therefore, that today, “in times of the Covid-19 pandemic”, there is an inevitable trade-off between freedom and health safety or other human rights, is itself a threat to freedom, or at least, an indication that on the basis of this perception there is an insufficient notion of freedom.

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¹² Unfreedom is a modality of freedom, namely the modality of its denying itself.

¹³ See the above introduced notion of “time of freedom”.

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