

## **The Meanings of Freedom<sup>1</sup>**

Leif Wenar

in *Contemporary Debates in Social Philosophy*, ed. L. Thomas

[Blackwell, 2007]

As George W. Bush was attending a NATO summit on June 28, 2004, an advisor passed him a note saying, “Iraq is sovereign.” In what one imagines was an entirely non-spontaneous reaction, Bush penned on the top of the note the words “Let Freedom Reign!” Except for its obvious contrivance, this was a rather effective attempt to frame American perceptions of the events of that day, playing as it did on the lyrics of a well-known nationalistic song in a way that encouraged Americans to compare the new Iraqi state to their own fledgling republic in the Founding Era.<sup>2</sup> The newly sovereign Iraq was now free, Bush was suggesting, in the same way that the United States had become free at the end of the Revolutionary War.

G.A. Cohen holds that when those on the right say the word “freedom,” they mean “absence of liability to interference by other people.”<sup>3</sup> It is, however, unlikely that Bush meant his remark to emphasize the fact that the Iraqi people had until the day of his speaking been subject to interference, at least to interference by foreign powers. For Bush himself was more than anyone else responsible for the interference by foreign powers into Iraq—which would make him the parallel in the American mind of the despotic British king George III. It is somewhat more likely that Bush meant to remind Americans that ordinary Iraqis had until recently been subject to interference by Saddam Hussein’s regime, and that they were now “free” in Cohen’s sense from this tyranny. Yet

Iraqis had been free in this sense since “Operation Iraqi Freedom” had deposed Hussein months before; there was no special additional freedom *in this sense* on June 28. The meaning of “freedom” most central in Bush’s exclamation, it seems, is not the best understood in Cohen’s “non-interference” construal at all. Bush’s words make most sense as invoking Constant’s ancient, classical republican meaning of the word in which a person is free if he is the member of a sovereign state in which citizens have an active role in their own government. “Freedom” could now reign, Bush was alleging, because Iraqis were as of that day empowered to determine their own fate through democratic processes. This is the same sense of “freedom” in which, for example, John Major once praised his Conservative predecessor Disraeli for having given many working men the freedom to vote.<sup>4</sup> But it is not the sense of freedom that Cohen marks out.

Since the primary sense of “freedom” in these remarks is not an absence of liability to interference, it appears that either Cohen’s hypothesis about what the right means by “freedom” is not always accurate, or that neither George W. Bush nor John Major are to the right on the political spectrum. This paper takes up the first possibility.

### ***1. What is Freedom Itself?***

There are two conceptual movements Berlin’s writings on liberty.<sup>5</sup> The first of these has contributed greatly to clear thought about the concept of freedom, while the second has counteracted the gains of the first. The first movement is to emphasize, and to contribute to the differentiation of, the great multiplicity of meanings in the ordinary use of the word “freedom.” Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative freedom, as Constant’s distinction between ancient and modern before it, has firmed in the modern mind a respect for the polysemic nature of “freedom.” Indeed Berlin himself could not

have imagined how far his own work would inspire further analysis of the meanings of “freedom” in ordinary usage. Since Berlin’s essay was written, philosophers have differentiated a large number of dimensions along which conceptions of freedom can vary, even within the broad category of negative freedom. For example:<sup>6</sup>

1. Whether it is only the actions of government officials, or rather the actions of any person, or rather any impediment whatsoever that counts as freedom-limiting interference;
2. Whether physical obstruction, or coercion, or both, count as interference;
3. Whether or not the interference is with what the agent desires to do, or is independent of this;
4. Whether or not the interference is with an action that is contrary to the agent’s interests;
5. Whether or not the interference is intentional;
6. Whether or not the interference is the direct or indirect result of the actions of others;
7. Whether or not interference with actions that the agent has no right to do counts as unfreedom;
8. Whether or not rightful interference counts as unfreedom;
9. Whether the freedom in question is limited to action within the scope of the liberties described in familiar bills of rights.

The meaning of any given ordinary-language occurrence of the word “freedom” will be locatable in the spaces defined by dimensions such as these. As the length of the list indicates, the range for semantic variation in ordinary language is considerable. The great virtue of Berlin’s distinction, and of the work of his many followers in the analytical project, is enable us to keep the different meanings separate. Everything is what it is, as Berlin said, and as we now know freedom as absence of government coercion that violates basic liberties is not freedom as lack of physical obstruction with

what an agent desires. Communication can proceed smoothly when different meanings of “freedom” are precisely specified; and audiences will be less likely to make false inferences from premises they accept to conclusions that they would not, without a blur in meaning, endorse. Cohen has himself written persuasively on the importance of analysis in political theory, and especially its importance in resisting ideological distortions:<sup>7</sup>

In so far as there is a connection between ideology and ordinary language, then ideological distortion is not so much *in* ordinary language as *of* ordinary language: our ordinary language misleads us not because it is deformed, but because we fail to achieve a perspicuous view of its complex nature.... Part of the remedy is to pay close attention to what we ordinarily say.

Cohen is certainly correct. The philosopher’s attention to the complexities of what we ordinarily say is often vital for disentangling the knots that ideological uses of terms can tie. By pulling strands of meaning apart, the analyst can hold them up for reasoned evaluation in the relevant context.

The analytical work of Berlin and his followers is useful not only for limiting confusion and delusion, but further for constructing normative theory. Having distinguished different meanings of a term such as “freedom,” the philosopher may then choose one for special attention. He may, that is, move from the role of analyst to the role of normative theorist, and stipulate that in his normative theory he will be using one out of the many ordinary language senses of the term that he has distinguished. Whether a theorist’s stipulation of some particular meaning proves fruitful will depend on the role of the relevant concept in his larger normative theory, and on how powerful that larger

normative theory proves to be. As Rawls says when discussing how he understands the five “formal constraints” on principles of justice:<sup>8</sup>

Each of these [terms] can, most likely, be defined in different ways, and even though the variations may at first sight appear minor, the differences may prove significant. The most suitable definition is not just a question of meaning but how the whole theory that results fits together.

Analysis in the Berlinian mode, then, is valuable both as a comb for conceptual tangles and as a prelude to stipulation and so normative theory. There is also, however, a second conceptual movement in Berlin’s work, which Cohen follows and which has proved far less salutary. This is to privilege, out of all of the senses of “freedom” revealed by the analysis of ordinary language, one particular sense of the word. This privileging is not done as a stipulative prelude to normative theory. Rather, as in Berlin’s writings, the text simply slips into suggesting that one sense of the word is favored. The usual sign that an author wishes to engage in this kind of semantic privileging of a term is the appearance on the page of phrases like “x proper” or “x in the strict sense” or “real x.” With Berlin, a loose family of ordinary language meanings of “freedom” becomes “freedom itself”;<sup>9</sup> by the time we reach Cohen we find that a rather specific sense of “freedom” has been elevated to the status of “freedom as such” and “freedom *itself*.”<sup>10</sup>

What could be the warrant for reaching into a polysemic concept such as freedom and privileging—simply as a conceptual matter—one of its many conceptions? How could one sense of “freedom” be “freedom as such”? The justification cannot simply be that one conception is more commonly used in ordinary speech. Even if Berlin’s or Cohen’s favored conception of freedom were statistically the most prevalent in common usage, this would not entail that there was some special or extra way in which this

conception exemplifies the broader concept of freedom. There is after all no special or extra way that Germans are Europeans simply because Germans are statistically more common on the continent. (Germans are not “Europeans as such.”). Moreover, while a certain conception of freedom may be central to some powerful tradition of thought, there are many powerful traditions of thought. The point of the analytical project is to increase, not to decrease, our sensitivity to the complexities of ordinary invocations of “freedom.” The function of privileging one conception of freedom appears rather to be to focus the reader’s attention on one spot alone.

The danger of this semantic privileging is that it creates a kind of tunnel-vision, blocking out the many complexities of ordinary usage that analysis has revealed. This is precisely what happens when Cohen writes about freedom and property. Of the many ordinary language conceptions of negative freedom, Cohen picks out a particular normatively neutral conception to christen “freedom itself.” As he characterizes this conception in an earlier essay on property and freedom: “I am *pro tanto* unfree *whenever* someone interferes with my actions, *whether or not I have a right to perform them, and whether or not my obstructor has a right to interfere with me.*”<sup>11</sup> This is without doubt one way in which people commonly use the term “freedom”; and without doubt it is not the only way. Yet Cohen insists that this neutral conception of negative freedom is freedom itself, even to the point of denying that coherent use of ordinary language can contain particular alternatives.

One alternative conception of freedom that Cohen dismisses is the “rights-definition” of freedom, deployed by Nozick among others. On this conception, a person is unfree insofar as he is liable to interference by others *when doing what he has a right*

*to do*. In “Freedom and money” Cohen asserts that this rights-definition “fl[ies] in the face of ordinary language”; in an earlier text he says that this definition requires a “ridiculous deviation from ordinary language.”<sup>12</sup> Cohen’s proof of this deviation is to point to one specific context in which the rights-defined conception of freedom would be inappropriate. His example is this: using the rights-definition of “freedom,” one could not say that a justly convicted prisoner is made unfree when he is justifiably imprisoned.<sup>13</sup> Yet that, Cohen says, is unacceptable. So the rights-definition of freedom flies in the face of ordinary language.

This is a remarkable argument, since there is no conception of freedom—including Cohen’s favored sense—that is appropriate in *all* ordinary-language contexts. It is easy for Cohen to find a context in which the rights-defined conception is inappropriate. Yet it is equally easy to find contexts in which Cohen’s normatively neutral conception of freedom would be inapt. It would for instance fly in the face of ordinary language to say that the exasperated mother of two screaming infants is free to hit the children with her shoe, or indeed free to strangle them in their cribs. Yet these statements are correct if we interpret “free” in Cohen’s neutral negative sense. Even if we limit ourselves to examples where no law-breaking occurs it is simple to find contexts where Cohen’s construal of “freedom” will not fit. We would not say, for instance, that a groom who promises his bride eternal fidelity is then free to sleep with the bridesmaids, or that anyone on the street is free falsely to inform the overwrought mother of a soldier that her son had just been killed. Presumably we would not find these kinds of counter-examples were Cohen’s favored conception of freedom “freedom itself.”

Indeed by the end of the “Freedom and Money” “freedom” has become entirely monosemic. Here Cohen dismisses not merely one alternative to his favored conception of freedom, but all of the alternatives at once. Having proved that that a right-wing argument is non-sensical when interpreted with his favored conception of freedom, he considers whether the right could reframe its political preferences in other terms. Yes, Cohen says, but only if the right gives up the language of freedom altogether.<sup>14</sup> Here the singular focus has become complete: since the right cannot use his privileged sense of “freedom,” the right cannot use the word “freedom” at all. All of the gains of analysis have here been rolled back, and all of the benefits of “attention to what we ordinarily say” have been lost. The walls separating the different semantic spaces are collapsed; now again “freedom” is one thing only.

Franklin Roosevelt’s most famous discussion of freedom looked forward to a world founded on four kinds of freedom: freedom of expression, freedom to worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.<sup>15</sup> It is surprising that Berlin, who called Roosevelt his hero, could have framed a definition of “freedom itself” that at best captures the first two of Roosevelt’s four. It is equally surprising that Cohen, who launches his essay with a motto from Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, could have insisted that “freedom” has only one proper meaning—and a meaning even narrower than Berlin’s at that. Both Berlin and Cohen seem to have fallen inadvertently into one of the less seemly habits of the political speech-writer: the privileging of one sense of a word so as to screen out other views. This is unhelpful within philosophical discussions of important concepts.



## 2. *Who is Right?*

According to Cohen, those on the right argue as follows:<sup>16</sup>

(1) Freedom is compromised by (liability to) interference (by other people), but not by lack of means.

(2) To lack money is to suffer not (liability to) interference, but lack of means.

So (3) Poverty (lack of money) does not carry with it lack of freedom.

(4) The primary task of government is to protect freedom.

So (5) Relief of poverty is not part of the primary task of government.

Cohen's attack is directed at the right-wing conceptual argument of 1-3. If we read "freedom" in this argument as neutral negative freedom, this attack succeeds. If anyone on the right (or the left) believes that neutral negative freedom does not vary with wealth, they are certainly mistaken. This is a point well worth noticing, and Cohen's treatment of the topic has put the conclusion beyond any doubt.

Who then believes the "right-wing" argument as interpreted with Cohen's favored sense of "freedom"? Cohen gives the impression that this argument so interpreted is widely believed, both inside the academy and out. He says that the question of freedom and money arises within a "standard political debate," that the bad conceptual argument he attacks is "popular among defenders of the capitalist system," and that he hopes his paper will influence "floating voters."<sup>17</sup> Cohen has made similar statements in previous articles where he has discussed freedom and property more generally.<sup>18</sup> Yet as far as I can determine, over the twenty five years that Cohen has published these articles concerning the right-wing understanding of freedom and property he has not named any real person on the right who makes the argument he attacks—at least when this argument is interpreted with a neutral negative sense of "freedom."<sup>19</sup> No doubt there are such people,

but it would be helpful to see who they are and what they have said. Without further evidence, we may begin to suspect that adherence to the right-wing argument using Cohen's favored sense of "freedom" is less widespread than Cohen suggests.

One reason to be suspicious that Cohen has faithfully captured a common right-wing position on freedom is that the right habitually extols freedoms that are not negative at all. We saw this at the outset in Bush's quote about freedom reigning in the newly-sovereign Iraq. This comes across even more strongly in right-wing paeans to the right to vote. For example, when Bush spoke in the Congress shortly after the 2001 attacks, he asked himself the rhetorical question "Why do the terrorists hate us?" His reply was as follows: "They hate what we see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."<sup>20</sup> Whatever else one thinks of Bush's answer, the right to vote that it invokes is not primarily a negative right. To have the right to vote is to have the authority—the normative power—to affect the outcome of an election.<sup>21</sup> If right-wingers habitually invoke freedoms that are *powers* instead of absences of liability to interference, then the right-wing idea that the primary task of government is to protect freedom takes on a different character than Cohen suggests in "Freedom and Money."

Another reason to suspect that Cohen has misunderstood his opponents emerges within the context of negative freedom itself. In "Freedom and Money" Cohen charges that those on the right are more likely to believe that the impoverished are not less free, since believing this might ease their guilty consciences. While the poor find it obvious that they have less neutral negative freedom, the rich tend to be blinded by self-interest to

this fact.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Cohen is correct in this *ad hominem* argument, yet if the pattern of belief that he indicates holds true one would expect right-wing politics to be rather different than they are.<sup>23</sup>

Cohen's argument in "Freedom and Money" is that the poor have less neutral negative freedom because, lacking money, they are less likely to gain favorable treatment by those who control access to commoditized goods and services. Yet degrees of neutral negative freedom vary along many axes in our society, even holding money constant. The dim and the tongue-tied are less free in Cohen's negative neutral sense to go to university, or to work good-paying jobs, since those who control access to these positions will treat them just as shopkeepers treat the impecunious. Similarly the homely and the disabled are less free in Cohen's negative neutral sense to hold public office and to find romantic partners. This is because they are more liable than the beautiful and the fit to be interfered with when they attempt to govern or love others. If Cohen is correct that those who lack such attributes will find it obvious that they are unfree, and if Cohen is correct that right-wingers believe his fourth premise that "the primary task of government is to protect freedom," then one would expect homely right-wingers to be pressing a freedom-based case for government action to improve their political and social lives. Yet we do not find this. We do not find any right-wing freedom-based receptiveness to government assistance for the dense, the inarticulate, the less able or the "beauty-poor." Nor is it true that such arguments are valid but outweighed by other right-wing values; such arguments are obvious non-starters for those on the right.

Combining these two grounds for suspicion, we can hypothesize that the freedoms most salient to the right are neither solely negative, nor primarily normatively neutral.

Surveying the right both within and beyond the academy, this appears to be clearly the case. The right is particularly concerned with rights such as the those in the second Bush quote above (concerning religion, speech, voting, assembly, and so on.). These are the rights that those on the right believe have an independent moral warrant. Many conservatives and libertarians believe that these rights are natural rights: that they are god-given, or otherwise inherent in the moral nature of man. Moreover, many conservatives and libertarians believe (in addition to or as an alternative to the natural rights view) that these central rights are effective means for promoting other goods, such as prosperity and innovation. Within both of these positions there is a marked tendency to speak of freedom as having the opportunity to do what one has the right to do—within both, that is, there is a strong tendency to use what Cohen calls the “rights-definition” of freedom. I take this to be a rather uncontroversial reading of the current political terrain, and would go so far as asserting that it will be uncommon to find a significant right-wing figure making an assertion about freedom that is not interpretable in such a moralized sense.

Now Cohen does not care for such moralized senses of “freedom.” When it comes to the justification of rights to private property, he says that such an understanding, “Renders impossible a defence of the legitimacy of private property by reference to freedom, since, on the rights-laden view of it, one cannot say what freedom (so much as) is until one has decided (on, perforce, grounds other than freedom) whether or not private property is morally legitimate.”<sup>24</sup> This is correct, but it fails to make contact with the mainstream of right-wing thought. For most on the right are quite convinced that there are “grounds other than freedom” that make private property morally legitimate. Some on

the right will say that property rights are natural rights. Others will say that a system of private property rights is the best system available for giving citizens opportunities to create an unsurveilled “personal sphere” while encouraging rising living standards, technological innovation, and creativity. Indeed moralized defenders of capitalism often say that private property rights are “the guardian of every other right”:<sup>25</sup> that social orders that protects private property are best able to assure that the liberties to worship, assemble, vote and so on are secure. Whether or not these assertions are correct is not our current concern. We are interested in what is *believed* on the right, and the familiarity of the arguments just rehearsed should suggest that those on the right tend to frame their beliefs about property and freedom around a moralized sense of “freedom.”

Any survey of the major theorists who have supported the resurgence of the right since the 1970s will bear this out. In this period the leading intellectual figures on the right have tended not to say, as Cohen suggests they have, that in a capitalist society there are no limitations on neutral negative freedom. While most have used the language of freedom, they have rather connected private property to freedom in other senses, and have grounded the justification of strong property rights in their alleged importance for achieving other morally desirable goals. So Milton Friedman, for example, argued that strong property rights are the best guarantors of the central political liberties, economic stability, consumer protection, educational quality, low inflation and high employment. Richard Posner and his followers have attempted to demonstrate how strong and extensive property norms maximize efficiency in many contexts. Richard Epstein has labored to show that protection of the “natural” right of property in fact is essential for achieving the utilitarian goal of the greatest happiness. And Nozick (whom Cohen

recognizes as articulating a central Thatcher-Reagan argument for private property) explicitly uses an moralized conception of freedom.<sup>26</sup>

Of the major figures, only Hayek is anywhere close to being a target of Cohen's argument. For although Hayek does join Friedman and the others in highlighting the instrumental value of strong property rights, he also stipulates a definition of freedom that is at least in the same neighborhood as the negative neutral definition that Cohen discusses. Yet of course Hayek does not hold to the right-wing position Cohen attacks, that a capitalist society is "a society in which there are no significant constraints on freedom."<sup>27</sup> The first line of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* says, "We are concerned in this book with that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society." He goes on, "The task of a policy of freedom must be to minimize coercion or its harmful effects, even if it cannot eliminate it completely."<sup>28</sup>

Who, then, does Cohen's argument hit? Which major right-wing figure on hearing Cohen's demonstrations that private property does not leave neutral negative freedom unrestricted, and that neutral negative freedom varies with wealth, would feel obliged to reformulate their political views, as Cohen insists they would, "without using the language of freedom"? Which of these figures indeed would think that Cohen had attacked their case for capitalism and freedom at all, instead of just thinking that he had tried to change the subject? Who, in Cohen's "standard political debate," is on the right-wing side?

Cohen has made two missteps. The first was to accede to the ideologist's intimation that there is such a thing as "freedom itself." The second was to ascribe a little-used sense of "freedom itself" to the right. It should have been a warning sign that

something had gone wrong when, according to Cohen's own understanding of the right-wing argument, it turned out that Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls<sup>29</sup> were on the right but Robert Nozick was not—and, as it turns out, neither are Milton Friedman, F.A. Hayek, or George W. Bush. The right will have been cheered that, during its greatest modern political ascendancy, some of the best minds on the left were obsessed with demolishing bogeys. But in the end it serves neither the right nor the left to talk past each other in debates over the nature of freedom.

---

<sup>1</sup> A comment on G.A. Cohen, "Freedom and Money," [this issue, pp. \*].

<sup>2</sup> "My Country 'Tis of Thee," sung to the tune of "God Save the Queen," replaces those final words with "Let freedom ring!"

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, "Freedom and money," p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> J. Major, *Speech to the Conservative Party Conference*, October 11, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> For a state-of-the-art discussion of various conceptions of freedom see Matthew Kramer, *The Quality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 238-39.

<sup>8</sup> J. Rawls, "The Independence of Moral Theory," in his *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. liii, liv, 124; cf. p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> "Freedom and Money," pp. 18, 9; "freedom itself" occurs *passim*. It might be thought that Cohen is here merely speaking in scare quotes, using the language of the right-wingers that he criticizes in order to cook them in their own juices, as it were. This is not correct: Cohen says (p. 26) that he himself construes "freedom" in just the same sense as (he alleges) right-wingers do.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> "Freedom and Money," p. 12; Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 61.

---

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> “Freedom and Money,” p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> F.D. Roosevelt, *State of the Union Address*, January 6, 1941.

<sup>16</sup> “Freedom and Money,” pp. 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> “Freedom and Money,” pp. 3, 26, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *History, Labour, and Freedom*, pp. 291-92; *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> By my count Cohen has published versions of the “property and freedom” argument eight times (including two revised reprints) since 1979. In none of these places does he quote anyone on the right using the neutral negative conception of freedom.

<sup>20</sup> G. W. Bush, *Address to Congress*, September 20, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> See J. Waldron, “Votes as Powers,” in M. Friedman et. al., ed., *Rights and Reason* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 45-64.

<sup>22</sup> “Freedom and Money,” pp. 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> And not least because many people who hold right-wing beliefs are poor.

<sup>24</sup> “Freedom and Money,” p. 26; cf. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, pp. 295-96.

<sup>25</sup> J.W. Ely, *The Guardian of Every Other Right* second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); the phrase is from the Revolution-era Virginian Arthur Lee.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, p. 297.

<sup>27</sup> “Freedom and Money,” p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960), pp. 11-12. Moreover, Hayek in this quote is representative of the right. The grand narrative of the right is of free people struggling against monarchy, fascism, communism, and now Islamic radicalism. In this struggle the right need not claim that in their “free” social order people are absolutely free, only that they are more free than they would be in the alternative. Yet this is an argument that Cohen has chosen not to engage. He only registers an opinion on the comparative freedom among economic systems in a footnote (footnote 42) to “Freedom and Money.”



---

<sup>29</sup> Cohen misunderstands Rawls. Cohen asserts that one paragraph in *Theory of Justice* shows that Rawls “accedes to the right-wing conceptualization of freedom,” and so that Rawls denies that poverty constrains freedom. Yet in this paragraph Rawls is not committing to any general conceptualization of freedom, but is rather discussing a defined list of political liberties: liberty of conscience, of thought, of speech; the right to vote and hold political office, and so on. Indeed Rawls states plainly, in a part of this paragraph that Cohen omits, “liberty is represented by the complete system of the liberties of equal citizenship.” (*Theory of Justice*, p. 204) So the point that Rawls is making in this paragraph is that rich and poor citizens can be equal in their possession of the liberties of citizenship—even though, as he says, the worth of these liberties may vary with citizens’ means. Rawls is not committing to the idea that Cohen tries to foist upon him, that poverty is unrelated to the liberty to access goods and services. The reason that Cohen does not see this is that he again presumes monosemy, inferring that behind every mention of a specific liberty there must be some generally applicable conception of “liberty as such.” Yet Rawls is the last theorist one would believe would make incautious commitments to a general conception of “liberty as such.” When Rawls countenances such a general conception at all, he speaks about it only dismissively: “No priority is assigned to liberty as such, as if the exercise of something called “liberty” has a preeminent value and is the main if not the sole end of political and social justice.” (*Political Liberalism*, pp. 291-92). Indeed, Rawls explicitly squashes Hart’s hypothesis that “liberty” in *Theory of Justice* might mean “liberty as such,” saying that “liberty” in the passages of *Theory of Justice* such as the one that Cohen quotes should instead be read as “basic liberties.” (*Political Liberalism*, p. 292 footnote 7). In fact it is hard to see how Cohen’s reading of Rawls could even get off the ground. Recall, after all, that Rawls’s fundamental idea of a free person is of a citizen who conceives himself as having the moral power to have and revise a conception of the good, who regards himself as a self-authenticating source of valid claims on social institutions, and who is viewed as capable of taking responsibility for his ends (*Political Liberalism*, pp 29-35). The theorist who framed this fundamental idea is not a theorist who holds a general, negative, right-wing conception of freedom.