OPP Brief: Why Freedom Fails  
by Mark Csoros



This OPP brief isn’t against the Negative value of freedom, per se, because I don’t know of any debater running that value. This brief is, however, against the concept of unbridled freedom that many Neg debaters embrace. The key arguments in this brief come from two great thinkers named Thomas Hobbes and John Nash. Hobbes was a 17th century philosopher who focused on the role of government, and whose work helped set the basis for the social contract theories of John Locke and the American Founding Fathers. Nash was a 20th century mathematician who won the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on game theory and was the subject of the brilliant biopic *A Beautiful Mind* (see photo above). Hobbes argued that unlimited freedom caused more harm than good, and Nash argued that individuals who thought only of themselves created worse outcomes than those who worked for the common good. We’ll take a look at the works of these authors, and hopefully achieve a greater understanding of how trade, economics, and governments interact.

Let’s start with Nash. His best-known concept is the Nash Equilibrium, which is a situation in game theory where no player can improve their situation by unilaterally taking action. In other words, cooperation is the only way to make the outcome better. The Economist explains this concept and the most common illustration thusly:

*“One of the best-known illustrations is the prisoner’s dilemma: two criminals in separate prison cells face the same offer from the public prosecutor. If they both confess to a bloody murder, they each face ten years in jail. If one stays quiet while the other confesses, then the snitch will get to go free, while the other will face a lifetime in jail. And if both hold their tongue, then they each face a minor charge, and only a year in the clink. Collectively, it would be best for both to keep quiet. But given the set-up, an economist armed with the concept of the Nash equilibrium would predict the opposite: the only stable outcome is for both to confess.*

*In a Nash equilibrium, every person in a group makes the best decision for herself, based on what she thinks the others will do. And no-one can do better by changing strategy: every member of the group is doing as well as they possibly can. In the case of the prisoners' dilemma, keeping quiet is never a good idea, whatever the other mobster chooses. Since one suspect might have spilled the beans, snitching avoids a lifetime in jail for the other. And if the other does keep quiet, then confessing sets him free.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

So, what does that tell us about economics? The Economist continues with its explanation:

*“The Nash equilibrium helps economists understand how decisions that are good for the individual can be terrible for the group. This tragedy of the commons explains why we overfish the seas, and why we emit too much carbon into the atmosphere. Everyone would be better off if only we could agree to show some restraint. But given what everyone else is doing, fishing or gas-guzzling makes individual sense. As well as explaining doom and gloom, it also helps policymakers come up with solutions to tricky problems.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In this resolution, Nash’s work points us to why we need governments to intervene: because individual actors can harm the common good (and, indirectly, their own good) when freedom isn’t restrained.

Hobbes takes a different tack, in his 1651 work he entitled *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*. For obvious reasons, the book is usually just called Leviathan. Hobbes wrote:

*“So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name. Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

It's human nature to quarrel, and all of the conflicts Hobbes describes can be seen in trade, though competition seems to be preeminent. Companies who are trying to capture market share, hold on to it, and protect their reputations tend to come into conflict. Without a common power, these conflicts can spiral out of control. In what is perhaps Leviathan’s most famous line, Hobbes describes a world without governance as a state of:

*“continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Doesn’t sound fun. Now, Hobbes sets up an extreme scenario here, but the extremity of it helps keep things in perspective. If there’s massive injustice that occurs when there’s no government, might there be smaller injustices that occur when government idly stands by and doesn’t enforce fair trade? Without some protections, life will be poor, nasty, brutish, and short for child workers in Bangladesh and cotton farmers in Africa. It can be really hard to make a living when you’re being outcompeted by nations with cheap labor, or developed infrastructure, or production subsidies designed to tilt the playing field. If we want government to do its job and keep trade from being an endless sea of conflicts, we have to put some restrictions on free trade.

1. The Economist, September 7th 2016“*What is the Nash equilibrium and why does it matter?”* https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2016/09/06/what-is-the-nash-equilibrium-and-why-does-it-matter [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Economist, September 7th 2016“*What is the Nash equilibrium and why does it matter?”* https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2016/09/06/what-is-the-nash-equilibrium-and-why-does-it-matter [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Hobbes, 1651 “Leviathan”, page 87-88. https://www.ttu.ee/public/m/mart-murdvee/EconPsy/6/Hobbes\_Thomas\_1660\_The\_Leviathan.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Hobbes, 1651 “Leviathan”, page 88. https://www.ttu.ee/public/m/mart-murdvee/EconPsy/6/Hobbes\_Thomas\_1660\_The\_Leviathan.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)