

To The Boy Who Sought Freedom: The Philosophy of Freedom and Social Contract Theory in *Attack on Titan*

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Shingeki no Kyojin, translated as *Attack on Titan*, is a highly acclaimed Japanese manga and anime series whose immense popularity amongst fans has led to widespread recognition. According to Masoud Dalil, “manga (kanji: 漫画; hiragana: まんが; katakana: マンガ) is a Japanese word referring both to comics and cartooning. ‘Manga’ as a term used outside Japan refers specifically to comics, originally published in Japan” (Dalil 12). Simply put, manga is a Japanese comic book, while anime refers to the animated adaptations of those comic books. Japanese manga writer and artist Hajime Isayama created *Attack on Titan*; he was a visionary who crafted a fictional world grappling with overwhelming threats, sparking a global fan culture.

The origins of *Attack on Titan* date to 2006 and can be traced “back to a 65-page one-shot Isayama had written when he was only 19, which served as the ‘prototype’ for the critically acclaimed manga series that later became a cultural juggernaut” (Dutta). Even at an early stage, he told a story that would captivate millions worldwide. These early drafts paved the way for the dark and intelligent realm of humanity’s fight against the terror of the Titans. From the beginning, *Attack on Titan* developed into a behemoth for a generation with its new-age storytelling. It raised the bar for anime and manga with new, exhilarating standards and reshaped views of heroism, morality, and liberty. Not only did *Attack on Titan* have extraordinary growth power, but its meteoric ascent also indicated Isayama’s excellent storytelling abilities and the numerous, relatable themes that connected a universal audience to the story.

Attack on Titan tells a story of humanity on the constant verge of extinction because of man-eating humanoid creatures known as Titans. The last of humanity has built a society behind three walls—Maria, Rose, and Sina—to ensure survival, representing both humanity’s safe haven and its prison. For many, life within the walls brings a fragile contentment. However, for the main protagonist, Eren Jaeger, the stifling confines represent everything he despises. In Season One, he declares, “If you think reality is just living comfortably and following your whims, can you seriously dare to call yourself a soldier? You’re nothing but livestock. You’re just pigs that want to live fat and happy behind the Walls!” (“The Night of the Closing Ceremony/Humanity’s Comeback, Part 2”). For him, life behind the walls represents a “pig pen,” with humanity just waiting for their slaughter. Eren dreams of a life beyond the walls where there are no more Titans and everyone can be free. Eren transforms by the end of the anime to achieve this dream, metamorphosing from hero to villain and challenging everything the audience thought they understood. His dramatic transformation raises a deep question: can pursuing freedom justify heinous actions? Throughout Eren’s journey, *Attack on Titan* masterfully explores Western philosophical themes such as freedom, the cycle of war, and moral ambiguity, revealing in the end that humanity’s true monster may not be the Titans but the choices made for survival. Overall, the anime challenges its audience to question the cost of liberation, the ethics of violence, and whether true peace can ever be achieved without sacrificing one’s humanity.

Attack on Titan dives into deep philosophical concepts and questions, exploring the depths of grief, betrayal, the endless cycle of war, and what it means to be human. However, at its heart, the anime is about the pursuit of freedom, the desire and sacrifices made for it. *Attack on Titan* utilizes complex characters and intricate storytelling to compel its viewers masterfully to question their morals. In order to highlight all of these ideas, *Attack on Titan* uses powerful symbolism, from the towering walls that confine humanity both physically and psychologically to its ever-shifting alliances that reflect how fragile trust can be. The final takeaway from *Attack on Titan* is this: the price of freedom is often not what one initially expects. However, what is freedom?

I. Freedom Expressed in *Attack on Titan*

At its core, freedom is a concept that encapsulates one's most intense desire for free will and confronts them with some of the most complex philosophical questions regarding human existence. Freedom is a fundamental human ideal and a paradox that reaches into dimensions of morality, political discourse, and existential questioning. One's understanding of freedom depends on whether one looks at it generally or philosophically. On the one hand, one can describe freedom as a clearly defined right: the ability and freedom to make choices, express opinions, and act without limitations. However, the more one interacts with freedom, the more it becomes clear that freedom has limitations.

Freedom is often understood as a release from physical, social, or political "chains." However, Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner—founder of Anthroposophy—offers a more profound and introspective view. For Steiner, freedom is not merely the absence of external limitations, but the realization of an inner moral and spiritual autonomy. He believed individuals achieve true freedom when they follow their highest personal insights. In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner writes, "[t]o be free means to be able of one's own accord to determine by moral imagination those mental pictures (motives) which underlie the action" (106). This, he explains, is made possible through "moral intuition," or the ability to discern and follow ethical ideals that arise from within.

At its heart, freedom is the ability to create one's own destiny, to speak freely, and to act in a way that is safe from objections. This is based on two principles: one, a principle of autonomy (to act, think, and decide for oneself) and two, a principle of self-determination (to live a life that authentically reflects one's deepest desires). However, freedom does not exist in a vacuum. Philosopher Stuart Rachels reminds that "morality, on this theory, consists in the rules that rational people will accept, on the condition that others accept them as well" (89). This framing introduces a necessary limitation: one person's freedom must coexist with others.

Simply put, one person's freedom is limited by another person's freedom, not just for the sake of public order, but because interactions shape individuals. In this sense, while freedom allows for individual expression and the cultivation of creativity, it also demands social responsibility. The challenge lies in balancing

personal liberty with collective well-being, especially when one person's expression of freedom threatens to infringe on another's. Considering the concept philosophically, freedom takes on a deeper and more complex meaning that deals with the absence of external constraints and challenges people to think about their identity and freedom as autonomous human beings. Freedom is not just about making choices; it requires the ability to choose actions sustained by reason, ethics, and a personal or spiritual purpose.

Steiner framed freedom through ethical individualism, the idea that freedom consists of acting upon one's moral intuition versus an external moral expectation. In general, Steiner notes that freedom is not solely the ability to act without problem, but the internal development of a self that can bear one's ethical responsibility. This broader philosophical view considers that history, culture, biology, and social expectations influence one's choices. Here, freedom is more than escaping the confines of any singular control. Steiner elaborates on this idea that freedom is not an external condition but an inner realization, a realization of the possibility of self-determination within the realm of the spirit. In this sense, freedom is taking responsibility of decisions made within the framework of societal norms.

The tension between internal agency and external restriction is a theoretical construct and a lived experience often subtly explored in literature and art. Lately, popular anime tends to engage explicitly with such perplexing philosophical topics by promoting narratives that account for the complexity and friction associated with the justice of freedom. One of the more obvious examples is the anime *Attack on Titan*. This series does not just pose the question of freedom for individuals but utilizes this theme to illuminate what freedom costs both the characters and the audience. *Attack on Titan* does not present freedom as a heroic or straightforward idea, but as extreme and often conflicting forms of brutality. The anime presents the cost of pursuing freedom, the sacrifices made by individuals to attain freedom, and the moral and existential weight of freedom in its valorization. At first, Eren Yeager's conception of freedom is comparatively simple. He wants to escape the walls that trap humanity to see and experience the world beyond. His well-known words represent this primal urge for freedom: "If you win, you live. If you lose, you die. If you do not fight, you cannot win!" ("The

World the Girl Saw / The Struggle for Trost: Part 2”). This conception of freedom is relatively simple; it is freedom born of a will to survive the fight against oppression and restriction. However, as the story unfolds, Eren’s simplistic understanding of freedom becomes more complex, and many of his actions could be construed as morally dubious.

As *Attack on Titan* moves through its narrative, it demands contemplation of a brutal question: can freedom exist without sacrifice? Eren goes from wanting to free humanity from the Titans to a destructive hunt for complete freedom. Eren’s hero arc presents many philosophical ideas, continually threading the line between freedom and autonomy while contemplating what is sacrificed for this autonomy. The most frightening part of this narrative is the social responsibility achieved from history, even ideology, that continues to dictate behavior and beliefs. The pursuit of individual freedom, along with its morals and motivations, briefly touches on a deeper tension: the conflict between personal liberty and the consequences that often follow. This tension identifies the contradiction most human beings hold when thinking about general and philosophical freedom. On the one hand, there is the embrace of the potentiality of liberty; on the other, there is a painful reality of suffering and moral ambiguity that comes with the condition of being human.

Eren’s chilling awareness that “Freedom is a lie” leads to the philosophical ambiguity at the core of the series (“A Sound Argument”). In this moment, freedom becomes more than the absence of chains; it is elusive and illusory, forever compromised by forces beyond the awareness of the individual. The series creates a view of freedom that is ambiguous and paradoxical, something that can liberate and destroy simultaneously. The more Eren strives for freedom, the more he understands his goal is fraught with moral challenges and grotesque consequences. In this sense, *Attack on Titan* is forcing a tricky question: what is the worth of true freedom? Can autonomy and self-determination ever happen without creating a greater cycle of violence and tyranny?

Ultimately, *Attack on Titan* forces its audience to think about freedom, not merely as a right that cannot be compromised, but instead as a complex and potentially destructive force. The show pushes one to consider whether freedom is attainable or if it only

exists when it is paid for by sacrifice, violence, and moral ambiguity. By illustrating freedom as both liberating and destructive, *Attack on Titan* exposes the tension between freedom as a general claim and the notion of freedom in a philosophical sense. In doing so, the show leads its audience to consider the possibility that freedom, if ever real, requires an unavoidable cost. With its deeply consequential moral dilemmas and rich character conflicts, the series encourages the audience to ask ourselves the same question: can freedom ever be free?

II. Symbols of Freedom: The Will to Power

Freedom is not simply about being without constraint, but rather a deep and sometimes tumultuous desire to go beyond limits to mold reality into one's desired appearance. This notion resonates in *Attack on Titan* when Eren Yeager embodies the pursuit of freedom that parallels the far more internally driven conception of "will to power" put forth by Friedrich Nietzsche. The German philosopher challenged the beliefs of nineteenth-century morality, religion, and social norms. He believed that freedom requires an internal strength to separate oneself from the values that are assumed by societal truths. He argues that true freedom arises with the strength to reject values placed on a person and the strength to create new values, seated in the will to affirm life. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), Nietzsche lays out the notion of the Übermensch, or "Overman," who transcends herd mentality and moral codes of convention, stating, "What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what is lovable in man is that he is an overgoing and a down-going" (28). For Nietzsche, this act of transformation, of "becoming," is humanity's highest expression of freedom. It is an act of overcoming, of creating oneself through struggle and self-assertion. The transition Eren undergoes throughout the series can be understood in relation to this: Eren's freedom is not simply static, passive freedom; it is dynamic, active, and destructive. Unlike Nietzsche's Overman, Eren does not seek to ultimately just be free within the world as it is, but rather to destroy the world (in part) to make something new from the wreckage.

Eren's quest for freedom is an embodiment of Nietzsche's philosophy. In the beginning, Eren's struggle to escape the walls is based on his simplistic need for survival. However, as the series

progresses, the quest for freedom becomes a deeper, destructive quest for total freedom, from which morals or community will not deter him. In Season One, Eren declares, “I want to see the world beyond the walls! I want to see the ocean,” which is a simple but childlike desire to escape the confinement of his world (“First Battle/Attack on Trost, Part 1”). Nevertheless, as his journey progresses, so does the depth of his desire for freedom; thus, he begins to align with Nietzsche’s idea of freedom as a force of self-assertion and transformation. Eren’s journey speaks to Nietzsche’s belief that “if a man knows the wherefore of his existence, then the manner of it can take care of itself” (*Twilight of the Idols* 2). A similar sentiment is proposed by philosopher Viktor E. Frankl, who attributes it to Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how” (4). Therefore, Eren’s “wherefore” or “why” is his desire to liberate humanity from captivity. Pursuing this larger objective, he is willing to sacrifice anything, even his values and other people’s well-being.

However, in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes that the free spirit transcends old moralities to become the “Übermensch.” In the context of complete chaos, Nietzsche postulates a process of self-overcoming, of elevating oneself above the herd, from which one can draw true freedom. In this instance, the free spirit is in control, so they can form new values and transcend old moralities (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). Eren’s rejection of societal norms through a forceful, all-encompassing desire to remake the world around him represents Nietzsche’s position; the power of individual will defines one’s destiny. As his character devolves, his desire for freedom transforms from a childlike escape to a destructive force with the line, “I don’t care about the cost! I’ll destroy everything, even the world itself, to gain freedom!” (“The Dawn of Humanity”). This marks the moment when Eren fully embraces Nietzsche’s idea of overcoming and creating beyond the world’s confines: “I am free. Whatever I do. Whatever I choose. I do it out of my own free will” (“Savagery”). This mirrors the Nietzschean Overman’s journey of self-creation, unbound by external moralities or the herd.

III. The “Autonomy of Rational Will”

Freedom is not simply about acting without restraint but also includes the ability to govern one’s actions through moral reason. In

Attack on Titan, Armin Arlert represents this Kantian notion of freedom, which is rooted in autonomy based on the ability to legislate behavior using rational principles. Kant defined freedom as the autonomy to act according to universal moral laws, which he believed all rational beings enjoy. In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant argued that “autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself” (47). He asserts that freedom is not the lack of external constraints. Instead, it is the ability to act according to one’s rational will, following the moral law that they would impose in the same situation.

Armin exemplifies Kant’s definition of freedom since he maintains an ethical duty to humanity despite the overwhelming obstacles. Armin does not act with desire or selfishness; he acts because he feels responsible for humanity’s survival and its ethical future. He personifies Kantian freedom as a natural human right (Kant). Armin always acts out of duty to what is right; even when at risk to himself, he believes that freedom is when he can carry out his rational and moral obligations. For Kant, freedom is related to an autonomous rational will acting on moral imperatives instead of the whims of external motives. In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes, “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (XVIII). This means that one should only act according to principles that could apply to everyone everywhere. Armin’s decisions, from his careful planning to his willingness to sacrifice, reflect this Kantian idea of freedom. He does not act on impulse or personal desire but follows the rational moral principles that he believes everyone should follow.

This is particularly clear in the clash with the Colossal and Armored Titans. Armin devises a dangerous scheme, fully aware that it would likely result in his demise. He intends to act as a distraction for the Colossal Titan, enduring the ensuing steam, while Eren and Mikasa take advantage of the opening to attack. This decision is not the product of reckless emotion or fleeting desperation, but a carefully reasoned choice rooted in duty. Armin understands the stakes and accepts the consequences with calm resolve. A moral imperative guides his act: to serve the greater good, even at the cost of his own life. In Kantian terms, a self-imposed law of reason rather than personal inclination motivates Armin, who acts according to a

maxim he could use as a universal principle. His sacrifice reveals that true freedom, as Kant conceived it, lies not in following one's desires but in choosing the morally correct course of action through rational deliberation. The whims of his desires do not drive Armin, rather a rational understanding of what is ethically necessary for humanity's survival does.

IV. The Freedom of the Spirit

According to the German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), true freedom is not just the freedom to act unimpeded, but rather the identity or self-realization gained by taking part in the ethical and historical life of a community. Hegel was one of the key thinkers of the nineteenth century, and in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), he proposed a relatively complex conception of freedom. Hegel summarizes his position as follows: “the right of individuals to their particularity is contained in the concrete ethical order, because it is in particularity that the social principle finds a visible outer manifestation” (197). Hegel considered individual autonomy one dimension of freedom. Freedom is realized through self-conscious participation in mutually recognized and shared institutions such as family, civil society, and the state. In this respect, freedom is realized not in isolation, but rather in the relationships and responsibilities individuals have with and to each other. Erwin Smith, the stoic, self-sacrificing leader of the Scout Regiment in *Attack on Titan*, captures this idea of freedom.

For Erwin, freedom is not about personal freedom but rather understanding how to fulfill specific needs for himself in the collective struggle for humanity's future. Erwin subverts his desire for the sake of a higher calling, which stays consistent with Hegel's position that an individual achieves true selfhood and ethical life only through active participation in a community. Individuals' ultimate purpose lies in uniting with others to serve a greater collective good (Hegel). Therefore, Erwin Smith embodies a Hegelian conception of freedom: he is a person who has found purpose, identity, and ultimately freedom by playing a part in the unfolding of a greater communal truth.

Erwin's actions convey Hegel's proposition that freedom is a communal and historical activity. Erwin sees himself as able to look at the future of humanity not as a parochial struggle, but rather as a

collective act to fulfill human possibilities. He is willing to give up his life for the sake of humanity, not because his freedom or existence depends on it, but because he understands that freedom would allow humanity to overcome its limitations and become fulfilled. Ultimately, he worries about humanity's survival, often at his own expense. Like Hegel, he believes individuals will realize freedom when they understand their dependencies upon each other for a larger dialectical and historical process. Erwin, as the leader and eventual martyr to humanity's cause, is an example of Hegelian freedom at work—the very kind of freedom that suggests democratic human emancipation was a communal struggle and not an individual one. Hegel did not understand freedom as an individual pursuit but as a dialectical process of self-realization through collective action.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel argues that absolute freedom can only be achieved through the recognition of one's position and identity in the historical and social reality of the community; one will never be completely free if their community is not willing to acknowledge and respect the exercise of personal freedom in a broader context. Erwin depicts the role of a leader in the fight against the Titans, demonstrating his strong understanding of the importance of community and his responsibility to act in service to the communal good. His leadership, sacrifices, and ultimately his death exemplify Hegel's idea that true freedom emerges through one's participation in the broader historical development of society. Erwin does not pursue his individual interests but aligns himself with the changing needs of humanity. He shows that freedom is not an individual desire but instead is realized through commitment to a common struggle. Erwin's development shows that freedom, as Hegel indicates, is not a negative freedom. It is not simply freedom from restraint, but an active freedom based on history, community, and ethical obligation. By placing the needs of the collective above his desires, Erwin becomes a vessel for a larger moral and historical purpose. His story reminds the viewer that individual freedom is the most meaningful when it contributes to the growth and transformation of the shared world.

V. Social Contract Theory Expressed in *Attack on Titan*

Social contract theory has varying meanings depending on the context in which it is presented. Whenever one considers Western

philosophical views of the social contract, they see social contract theory as a theory of governance and moral duties; society is bound together by an agreement (implicit or explicit) between individuals and those who govern them. As philosopher Stuart Rachels suggests, “morality is about mutual benefit; you and I are morally bound to follow a rule only if we would be better off living in a society in which that rule were usually followed” (85). The primary concept is that people must agree, even if only tacitly, to give up certain freedoms for security, order, and mutual benefit. This is the foundation of modern political systems, determining laws, rights as individuals, and societal conventions.

In contrast, the social contract theory explored in *Attack on Titan* shifts the focus from the traditional notion of governance and law to a more existential and individual struggle. In the series, social contract theory becomes a framework for understanding the complex relationship between freedom and survival in a world constantly under siege. Eren Yeager’s defiance of authority and the Scouts’ fight for humanity’s freedom challenge the idea that the social contract is an unbreakable pact between individuals and a governing body. Instead, *Attack on Titan* forces its characters—and its audience—to confront whether the security provided by the walls is genuinely worth the oppression it demands. The series critiques the traditional notion of the social contract by portraying a society where the contract itself is continuously questioned, renegotiated, and, at times, broken, especially when those in power betray the trust of their people.

Both views of social contract theory struggle with a tension between individual freedom and collective safety. Western thinkers’ social contract theories, such as those of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were fundamentally focused on the nature of governance and the moral rationale of social order. However, *Attack on Titan* emphasizes social negotiation in a way that both highlights continuity and underlines the social forces that conflict with emotional content. The social contract is dynamic in *Attack on Titan*. It is not a fixed agreement, even if it is constructed and ratified by the will of the people dehumanized by a failing authority. The characters in *Attack on Titan* repeatedly have to negotiate the social contract dynamic by subverting previously established roles within society. They also have to sacrifice their lives

and self-interest, as opposed to the old ways of sacrificing their freedom for protection from threats and breaches in the walls. Unlike the traditional theories, the nature of the social contract in *Attack on Titan* showcases profound and contradictory expressions of freedom and governance as depicted in life and death contexts instead of the abstract negotiation of governance.

Overall, the traditional social contract theory emphasizes cooperation for the common good, with implicit or explicit agreements that form the basis for laws and morality. However, *Attack on Titan* complicates this by exploring the breakdown and renegotiation of the social contract in a world where survival often conflicts with the ideals of freedom and order. Both views engage with the question of how societies are held together and the sacrifices individuals are willing to make. However, *Attack on Titan* pushes the boundaries of this theory by examining the consequences of those sacrifices when the social contract itself is in jeopardy.

VI. The Walls as Social Contract

Mikasa Ackerman conveys the harsh reality of *Attack on Titan* as a world where freedom and safety cannot coexist: “The world is cruel, but also very beautiful” (“I Can Hear His Heartbeat: The Struggle for Trost, Part 4”). This struggle is more evident in the walls enclosing humanity: Maria, Rose, and Sina. These walls keep the last vestiges of civilization safe from the monstrosity of the Titans, but they also cage people into ignorance and compliance. This contradiction reflects the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth-century English philosopher who insisted that people give up absolute freedom to a dominator in exchange for security. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes explains that the authoritative state is necessary between humanity and a savage state of nature:

In such condition, there is no place for industry...because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing...and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death (147).

The monarchy in *Attack on Titan* is an absolute power maintaining control over the people on Paradis, particularly by excluding

information about the world beyond. The series poses a critical question: is such a contract truly just, or is it merely another form of oppression?

Thomas Hobbes lived through the threat of bloody anarchy in the English Civil War; thus, Hobbes viewed human nature and politically motivated behavior in a dismal light. Hobbes believed in a “state of nature” where no government existed, one that is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (147). Hobbes contended that humans would devolve into violence without a strong central authority and then be forced to act to ensure their self-interests. The basis for Hobbes’ argument was that people would willingly surrender some of their freedoms to a sovereign in exchange for collective group protection, both from each other and from anarchy. This is, of course, a basis for Hobbes’ political philosophy known as the social contract. Unlike philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau, who characterized the social contract as a means to organize people for better freedom and collective wellbeing, Hobbes regarded it as a last resort to stop the descent into chaos. The Eldian people of Paradis (the society enclosed by the protective walls) want to maintain a government that controls every aspect of their lives, so long as the government justifies its actions as protections from the Titans outside the walls. Under the monarchy, the government provides the security and safety of residence, so long as the people do not dissent against their authority. The monarchical government deliberately hides knowledge about the Titans, the world beyond, and humanity’s true history to maintain order. The people, much like Hobbes’ subjects, accept this rule out of fear, believing that without the monarchy’s control, society would collapse into chaos.

The walls are a metaphor for Hobbes’ *Leviathan*—a protective force ensuring survival and imposing strict limitations. Those within the walls may be safe from Titans, but they are also physically and intellectually trapped. The government enforces obedience by punishing dissent, as seen when Minister Nick warns the Survey Corps that questioning authority could lead to execution, revealing, “You have no idea what lies hidden within these walls” (“Response: The Struggle for Trost, Part 6”). Censorship, ignorance, and propaganda keep the people docile, much like how Hobbes envisioned a powerful ruler would prevent disorder. However, this social contract is ultimately built on deception. The monarchy’s

legitimacy is based on the fabricated story that a divine king built the walls to shield humanity. In reality, they are the remnants of a failed war and the Titans outside are Eldians transformed as a form of punishment rather than mindless monsters. This revelation shatters the illusion that the government's control is for the people's benefit. Instead of ensuring survival, the monarchy is preserving its power at the expense of the truth.

Hobbes argued that entering a social contract does not allow rebellion which would only return society to a state of nature: "The right of nature...is the liberty each man hath to use his power as he will for preserving his nature" (Hobbes 150). *Attack on Titan* challenges this idea. When the truth about the monarchy's deception is uncovered, the Survey Corps lead a coup to overthrow the corrupt government, directly opposing Hobbes' belief that stability must be maintained at all costs. The fall of King Fritz's regime in Season Three marks a rejection of Hobbesian authority and a shift toward a new vision of governance that seeks to align with the people's true interests, akin to Rousseau's general will. However, the consequences of breaking this contract are severe. The fall of the monarchy does not bring peace but rather new threats from Marley (the ancient enemy of Paradis), the Yeagerists, and within their own leadership. Eren Yeager, disillusioned with the idea that any government can offer true freedom, ultimately rejects all forms of social contracts and embraces a Nietzschean will to power, leading to "The Rumbling." In doing so, he demonstrates the very fear Hobbes warned of: without a central authority, humanity is doomed to endless conflict and destruction.

Attack on Titan offers a reflective critique of Hobbes' social contract that demonstrates its necessity and danger. The walls protected humanity from external threats, yet they imposed submission and ignorance. Meanwhile, the monarchy, like Hobbes' sovereign, maintained social stability and order at the expense of truth and individuality for the social contract. The world does not turn into a utopia when the social contract is broken; it becomes war-ridden. Thus, complete freedom can be equally dangerous as complete subordination. Ultimately, the series does not provide a simple answer. It asks if one would accept the safety of the walls, even at the cost of their freedom, or if they would risk everything to knock the walls down, knowing the danger that awaits them on the

other side. Eren and the Survey Corps face these decisions, forcing the audience to evaluate the cost of security and an individual's definition of complete freedom.

VII. Revolution and the General Will

Throughout *Attack on Titan*, Armin Arlett repeats, “Someone who cannot sacrifice anything, cannot ever change anything” (“Descent”). This quote epitomizes revolution against the ruling system to create a better world. The core of the series’ political conflicts is the question of who has the legitimacy to act as a ruler, and who the ruler serves. The Survey Corps overthrows Rod Reiss, the corrupt monarch, on behalf of the people, harkening back to the ideals of revolution in the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Amongst the many concepts he introduced, Rousseau theorized about the general will—a common good that directs policies. It follows logically, therefore, that a revolt is justifiable and necessary when the individual or the ruling class/monarch acts out of self-interest instead of the people’s interest. Rousseau states, “the general will alone can direct the State according to the object for which it was instituted, i.e., the common good” (49). The fall of the Reiss monarchy in *Attack on Titan* mirrors Rousseau’s vision of revolution, demonstrating how a society must sometimes destroy an unjust system to build something better.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an important figure in the Enlightenment, and his most well-known work is *The Social Contract* (1762). In contrast to Thomas Hobbes, who argued that individuals choose to surrender their freedom to a powerful ruler in exchange for security, and John Locke, who believed in individual rights, Rousseau argued that true freedom is achieved when individual interests are aligned with the general will or the greater good of society. In Rousseau’s view, a legitimate government must act according to the people’s will and not that of the ruling class. Rousseau argues, “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains,” emphasizing the contradictions in societies where rulers act against the people’s interests and oppress them (36). If a government accepts corruption and puts its power ahead of the people’s needs, it is not just unreasonable; the people must overthrow it. This notion of revolution anchors *Attack on Titan*. In the first two seasons, both the Titans and an authoritarian government which hides knowledge and

oppresses the masses corner humanity. The monarchy, ruled by the Reiss family, believes it rules by divine right, covers up knowledge of the lush outside world, and suppresses dissent. The privileged lives of the nobility and the misery endured by millions of the population exemplify Rousseau's position that rulers lose power due to their unaccountability to the people. The further distance they are from the people, the more influenced they become by abuse of power and corruption (Rousseau).

The turning point arises in Season Three, where the Survey Corps, led by Erwin Smith, execute a coup against the monarchy. When the national government starts feeling like it is losing its hold on authority, it declares the Survey Corps traitors and sentences them to death. However, through a combination of military strategy and public persuasion, the rebellion exposes the monarchy's lies, leading to the installment of Historia Reiss—a true heir who, unlike her predecessors, is willing to put the people first. This revolution perfectly aligns with Rousseau's belief that rulers forfeit their right to govern when they betray the general will. Rousseau states, "the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct" (51). The monarchy's refusal to act in the people's interest justifies its removal. Moreover, Erwin's speech to Commander Pyxis about humanity's right to truth reflects Rousseau's claim that people must actively shape their society rather than be blind followers of authority. Erwin tells Pyxis, "if you wish to do nothing, then we will die together," reinforcing Rousseau's call for civic engagement and resistance against tyranny ("Midnight Sun").

However, *Attack on Titan* does not present revolution as a simple solution. While the Survey Corps succeeds in overthrowing the monarchy, they quickly realize that governing in the people's interest is more complicated than simply removing a corrupt ruler. Historia's reign brings transparency and reforms, but external threats from the nation of Marley still loom. This raises a difficult question: can a government embody the general will in a world where power dynamics and survival dictate politics? Rousseau argues that true freedom requires a government that continuously reflects the collective good. Also, the sovereign power derived from the general will must always be responsive to the people's will (Rousseau). However, as seen in later seasons, even the new leadership faces

difficult decisions that do not always align with the people's will. For example, when Eren takes matters into his own hands and launches an attack on Marley, the newly established government struggles over whether to support him or rein him in. In this case, *Attack on Titan* shows that even revolutions born from the general will can lead to new conflicts over power and control.

The events of the story of *Attack on Titan* reflect the path outlined by Rousseau for political change: oppression generates revolution and people will remove governments that do not serve them. Alternatively, these governments will, in time, collapse. However, it also offers a sobering reality: revolutions are seldom the end of oppression. Even when the people take back power, new power structures emerge and the cycle of government, conflict, and resistance begins anew. Just as Rousseau wrote that the power of the general will must be constantly monitored and protected to exist, *Attack on Titan* reminds audiences that freedom is never won for good and must continuously be fought for. In the end, *Attack on Titan* does not simply wonder if revolution is justified, but also whether revolution can ever achieve freedom. Throughout the demise of the monarchy and the emergence of a new leadership, *Attack on Titan* addresses the same questions that have shaped history: who represents the will of the people, and how does a society ensure that power remains in the hands of those it serves? The answer is complicated and the fight for freedom lives on.

VIII. Eren Yeager and the State of Nature

In the early episodes of *Attack on Titan*, Eren Yeager declares, “If you win, you live. If you lose, you die. If you don’t fight, you can’t win!” (“Primal Desire/ Attack on Trost Part 9”). These words define his persistent pursuit of freedom, and Eren refuses to accept a world where people fearfully hide behind the walls. He dreams of survival and a life without chains—a world where those in power do not confine, deceive, or manipulate humans. His journey from an idealistic boy to a feared revolutionary mirrors a deeper philosophical struggle. It echoes John Locke’s ideas and discusses the broader question of whether true freedom can ever exist within a social contract, or if only the use of sheer force could seize it.

John Locke, the Enlightenment philosopher of the seventeenth century, believed that humans had the natural rights of

life, liberty, and property. He disagreed with Thomas Hobbes, who maintained that men have to trade their freedom to an absolute monarch for a sense of security. Locke believed that a government is the people's servant, not their master. Locke argued that if a government acted against the people's natural rights, then the people had the right and the responsibility to revolt against their government. In *The Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Locke declares, "the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom" (38). This philosophy follows Eren's struggle closely. At first, he sees the Titans as the greatest threat to his people's freedom. The Titans are the monstrous forms that threaten his people's peaceful walled existence. However, as Eren receives more truths about the deceived monarchy—erased history, manipulated population, and the constructed origins of the walls—his rage shifts and he also sees the ruling class as an oppressor. Like Locke, Eren perceives the ruling government as delegitimate because it fails to serve its people. In Locke's opinion, "whereby governments are dissolved, and that is, when the legislative or the prince, either of them, act contrary to their trust" (131). Eren's choice to join the Survey Corps to eliminate the monarchy and promote Historia Reiss is an effort to create an equitable system. Eren is now in a transformed stage of his development and embodies Locke's version of revolution: a battle against tyranny to restore people's natural rights.

However, Eren's beliefs develop as *Attack on Titan* unfolds. Even after the monarchy topples, the new government faces challenges: infighting for dominance within the Eldian government and the ascendance of Marley, which has subjugated Eldians for many generations. Eren starts to question whether governance can ever grant freedom. If power inevitably leads to oppression, then no social contract, no matter how just, can truly secure freedom. This marks a turning point in his ideology. Where Locke believed in the possibility of a just government that safeguards the people's rights, Eren became increasingly convinced that freedom can never be given, only taken. His actions move beyond Locke's framework and toward a far more radical philosophy: liberation comes not through laws and governance but through the absolute destruction of the old order. As Locke asserted, "men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate,

and subjected to the political power of another, without his consent” (61). Yet as Eren matures, he rejects this concept as flawed, believing that the establishment of government inherently restricts true freedom. His decision to unleash “The Rumbling”—an apocalyptic event that annihilates most of humanity outside of Paradis—is the ultimate manifestation of this belief.

He sees the world as a prison that can only be escaped when the foundations on which it stands are erased. Eren’s extreme deeds pose a troubling query: is he now the oppressor he once despised or is he still fighting for freedom? His vision for freedom—seizing control at any cost—is not about justice or preserving rights. In this, he embodies Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of the will to power—the concept that the fundamental driving force of humanity is not survival, morality, or social contracts, but the pursuit of dominance and self-determination. Eren no longer seeks to negotiate freedom within a political system; he wants to obliterate any structure that could impose limits on his will. Locke, however, argued that “freedom is not, as we are told, a liberty for every man to do what he lists,” suggesting that the proper role of governance is not to constrain freedom, but to protect it by providing the security needed for individuals to flourish (38).

Eren’s evolution urges the audience to confront a fundamental question: can true freedom exist within any social contract, or must it always be fought for, often at significant cost? Locke’s theory suggests that a government can and should protect individual rights, yet *Attack on Titan* presents a bleak counterargument. No matter the regime, whether monarchical, military, or even revolutionary, the structures of power inevitably lead to new forms of control. Locke maintains that the only way any government can claim legitimate power is by protecting the natural rights of its citizens. Nevertheless, *Attack on Titan* complicates this claim, showing how the state’s structure may lead to exploitation. Eren’s journey also illustrates the dangers of pursuing absolute freedom through force. He transforms from a hero of liberation to a destroyer of nations. This reflects the paradox of revolution: those who fight in the name of freedom often become the next tyrants. The cycle of oppression continues, suggesting that the search for absolute freedom may be an illusion that can never be fully realized. Ultimately, *Attack on Titan* does not provide any easy answers. It

demands that the audience grapple with Eren's choices and their moral implications. Was his quest for freedom justified or did he become what he swore to destroy? Is the social contract a path to justice or is it another form of control? Ultimately, the audience is left with the haunting realization that in pursuing freedom, the lines between hero and villain, liberator and tyrant, are never as clear as they seem.

Attack on Titan, at its heart, represents a constant battle for freedom. Is freedom possible without infringing on others' freedom or does freedom inherently demand sacrifice? Is one truly free or merely bound to the idea of freedom? Can true freedom ever be achieved within a social contract or must it always come at the cost of struggle and sacrifice? The viewer sees that the characters' experiences create an enhanced dialogue around power, survival, and governance. These experiences echo the perspectives of philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

As the series unfolds, the philosophies of these thinkers deepen the anime's exploration of freedom and its relationship with authority. Hobbes expresses pessimism regarding human nature, calling it "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (147). The walled society of Paradis reflects his train of thought, wherein monarchical rule extends as far as to dictate absolute control over the lives of the subjects; their value is grounded in survival. The kingdom may be free of threats from the outside world; however, to achieve that social contract, the monarchy compromises the right to individual freedom and individual truth by keeping the subjects in constant ignorance. The monarchy tightly controls access to knowledge, severely limiting access to relevant information about the outside world. The protagonist, Eren Yeager, initially accepts this way of living, fundamentally opting into the justified social contract; however, as he comes to question the motives of the monarchy, the legitimacy of the social contract also comes into question. *Attack on Titan* displays Hobbes' theory: the price of safety is often the erosion of individual liberties. In direct opposition to Hobbes, John Locke argues that a legitimate social contract must protect the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. Locke declares that a government no longer protecting these rights justifies a rebellion and creates a moral obligation. This is an idea to which Eren relates when his perspective

on the world changes. Eren first considers the Titans as humanity's most significant threat, but later realizes the real enemy is the monarchy. The dethroning of the Reiss monarchy for a more representative government led by Historia also appears to enforce Locke's idea of fighting back instead of revolution. However, in the series' final chapter, Eren becomes increasingly cynical about a social contract, questioning whether any government can protect freedom.

Rousseau's notion of a "general will" adds another layer of complexity for Eren. Rousseau posits that one finds freedom through direct participation in collective decision-making, allowing the people to create a society collectively. The Survey Corps' uprising against the monarchy can be interpreted as a Rousseauian revolution as they actively attempt to overthrow a corrupt regime and replace it with one that reflects the people's collective will. However, *Attack on Titan* pushes the audience to proceed reflectively, asking whether any system of government, regardless of how ideal it is, can reflect the general will while also existing within a corrupt power structure. The transition from a monarchy to a regime and then to Historia's reign alters the governance process and means that both internal and external threats challenge her power and leadership. The heroes of *Attack on Titan* must conclude whether true freedom can be pursued politically. Moreover, Kant's focus on autonomy and universal moral laws is present in the anime. Kant claims that one must act only according to the principles one believes to be universal laws. Characters like Erwin Smith and Historia attempt to act according to Kantian morals and are duty-bound to their people, but, ultimately, *Attack on Titan* portrays to the audience that autonomy is not so straightforward. Eren has several personal sacrifices, or moral compromises, that are more blatantly defined than his struggles with the greater good. Eren's journey complicates this by showing the audience how difficult it is to align personal actions with universal principles, especially regarding freedom and the cost of freedom.

One can see the essence of Hegel's theory of history as a dialectical process—freedom is produced through the opposition and the subsequent reconciliation—throughout *Attack on Titan*. The recurrence of oppression, revolution, and subsequent new order to claim freedom aligns with Hegel's belief that history is born from conflict and the resolution of contradictions. Eren's rebellion against the monarchy produces a new order but fails to produce the peace

or freedom he expected. Instead, it provides new conflict, which aligns with Hegel's view that freedom is always made through struggle but never actualized in its perfect form. Lastly, Nietzsche's "will to power" provides the most radical reformulation regarding Eren's evolution. Nietzsche argues that genuine freedom is neither given by society nor afforded by laws; instead, freedom must be taken through coercion and violence. Eren's decision to let loose "The Rumbling" signifies his negation of all social contracts and his embrace of Nietzsche's idea that freedom arises from dominating the world and imposing one's will on it. Eren's journey ultimately becomes a striking rejection of the social contract, embodying Nietzsche's darker vision of freedom, not as liberation for the oppressed but as the assertion of dominance by the powerful.

In the end, *Attack on Titan* presents a complex, thought-provoking narrative as it grapples with deeply rooted philosophical questions regarding social contracts, the nature of freedom, and the inescapable cycle of war. Through its richly developed characters and morally ambiguous world, the anime challenges Western philosophers—Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche—by drawing from and critiquing freedom's viability in a structured society. The series uses its narrative to expose intrinsic contradictions and moral tensions that emerge when people seek liberation from within collective systems of power, rather than endorsing or disputing a single philosophical doctrine. The characters' persistent pursuit of freedom forces viewers to confront unsettling questions regarding power, sacrifice, responsibility, the difference between heroes and villains, and the fine line between freedom fighters and tyrants. *Attack on Titan* troubles the viewer when they see that seeking freedom could recreate the violence and domination it wants to shed. According to the show, freedom in its purest form may be humanity's most fantastic ideal and its most dangerous illusion.

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