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**An interview with Richard M. Stallman  
by Paul Mathias  
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**PM:** Software, and the way it is produced, does not only concern the use of a computer or word processing program, but many aspects of our lives, from medicine to security, from road/traffic management to trains and airplanes, etc. Now obviously software is not unaffected by the way the industry produces it. Whence the importance of "Free software" (FS).

**RS:** That is pretty close to what I think, but it is not entirely the same.

It is true that medicine and trains and roads are managed by software. But we are not the users of that software. The users are the doctor and the hospital, the SNCF, and the traffic authority. I hope that they are using free software so that they have control over their own computers, but you and I cannot and should not have control over the software running on THEIR computers. Of course, there are certain requirements on how they deal with the public, such as privacy law. If they do not have control of their computers, they can't take responsibility to make sure their computers treat us properly.

Meanwhile, there are many tasks in life in which we use software running on our own machines. This does not just include the devices we call "personal computers". It also includes handhelds, which are also computers. It also includes cell phones.

Also, many ASPECTS of life are carried out using computers. For instance, publication (even on paper) normally involves computers. Can we assure freedom of expression if private parties have control over these computers?

**PM:** FS does not only designate a legal status, it also indicates an attitude towards creativity.

**RS:** The idea of free software is that the author of software is not entitled to any power over its users. You are free to contribute to free software or not, as you wish, but once you contribute something, people who use it can use it in freedom. You can think of this as rejecting the idea of the author as a semi-divine "creator" who deserves special power over the users of the program.

In general, our society has a tendency to overemphasize the importance of creativity relative to other values such as freedom and social solidarity. I believe that what is primary is the situation that the people are in, and what they can do in their lives. Their interactions are a part of this, but not the whole of this. What you can do on your own is important too. "Creativity" is just a small part of this. People often overstate the importance of that one aspect of life.

Perhaps this is more than just a popular mean. I suspect that this is the result of a long PR campaign by the copyright industry, which desires to exercise power over the public in the name of the "creators". People have often criticized and opposed the specific demands of these companies, such as the DADVSI, but mostly they do so accepting the basic presumption of that

PR campaign: that creativity is the most important value, and must be encouraged no matter what the cost to society.

I disagree with that position. I do wish to encourage creativity and innovation, all else being equal. But I will not sacrifice any essential freedom to do so.

**PM:** It seems what we have with FS is some sort of a procedure, a free and mutable process, not a bi-polarized pattern involving a “creator” and a “product”.

**RS:** Free software is not a procedure! Free software is software. A free program is a program, a written work. A privateur program is also a written work. The difference between them is not in what the work *says*, or in how it was written. The difference is in the freedom which the user does or does not have in using the work. To look at it as a "process" is to put the emphasis in the wrong place. What we have is a community of people who are free, who use and change software in freedom.

The resulting use and transformation of the software by the community can be regarded as a process. This is not the same thing as “the way the program was developed by its developers”. The former is a matter a future potential, the latter is a question of history. But it is a mistake to emphasize the development of the software, because that is secondary. What is primary is the people, and their community of freedom. This particular mistake, emphasizing the development of the software and disregarding the people, is very common, and I will resist it unremittingly.

Sometimes free software is a product, because sometimes companies are paid to write and maintain free software. However, that is neither here nor there.

Free software enables the free software community to have a certain a way of life. What I mean by a "way of life" belongs to a community. It includes many different possible paths that an individual can choose, but also has limits. Thus, we could speak of the "French way of life", which includes those commonly taken paths anyone can have in mind, but also many other possibilities. We can also speak of the "free software way of life" and the "user-subjugating software way of life".

**PM:** Then FS refers not only to a practical choice, relative to the way things are done; but mainly to an ethical one, relative to the way things *should* be done.

**RS:** For clear understanding we MUST distinguish “free software” as software from the “free software movement”. Free software is software, a kind of literary work, in the same way that encyclopedias and text books; or clean rivers are part of the environment. By contrast the free software movement is a social movement of people, like the environmental movement.

The environmental movement works for (among other things) clean rivers. But the environmental movement isn't made of rivers, it is an intentional collective activity of people. Those two are not the same; they have a relation of activity and its goal. Likewise, the free software movement is a movement to produce and move to free software. There was free software before there was a free software movement, just as there were some clean rivers before there was an environmental movement.

**PM:** Considering the FS movement, should we interpret it as a structured socio-political apparatus, or just as a contemporary ideology meant to inspire the building of our future?

**RS:** I don't understand the difference between those two descriptions, so I'll say something that might perhaps relate. The FS community is in the position of American democracy in 1800. That worked well enough to show democracy was viable, but it covered just a fraction of the whole world, and did not even extend to all American citizens. Today's free software community works well enough to show that freedom in cyberspace is viable. But only a fraction

of the inhabitants cyberspace are in our community, and of those who do participate, most of them still use some non-free software. We have a long way to go to complete the liberation of cyberspace.

**PM:** Would you consider "the liberation of cyberspace" to be a lot more practical than the liberation of man from religious or economical alienation?

**RS:** Yes. I know — from experience — precisely what it means to liberate people from the dominion of the lords of proprietary software. It is hard to hit this target, but at least we have a clear target. How to liberate people from economical alienation is a question to which nobody reliably has an answer. And as for "religious" alienation, I am not even sure what that means. This does not mean we can propose a schedule. Schedules don't apply to struggles for freedom, which are generally carried out against the odds. There was no precise schedule in 1776, or 1789, or 1968, or even 1944. Remember, "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." Clearly enough, no one has ever built an a social system that can't possibly become corrupted or used for abuses, but such perfection is too much to ask for. We must not sit by while gross injustices are perpetrated, merely because we don't know a perfect replacement for a bad social system.

**PM:** Then “the liberation of cyberspace” is a practical goal, not a mere idealistic delusion — “idealistic” meaning “absurd”, or “literary”, even “irresponsible”...

**RS:** That interpretation of "idealistic" is a distortion used by cynics to unjustly smear idealistic movements. It is mistaken. Idealism is the pursuit of a goal that goes beyond the appetites. The ideals of free software are an *instance* of a more general idea of ethics. That more general idea of ethics is not new, and since it is not specific to software, I would not label it as "free software" or anything "software".

**PM:** How would you describe or define that “more general idea of ethics”?

**RS:** I can't define it very precisely. I do not have a formalized system of ethics. I have a bundle of practices for applying my conscience to situations, and some general principles: such as, "profit does not justify trampling people's freedom." These ethical ideas correspond more or less to secular humanism. For instance I reached the conclusion that software developers must respect the freedom of the software's users, by making it free software, after being in both positions, that of the user and that of the developer, and comparing my feelings and the reports of my conscience from the two sides.

**PM:** Let's say so. "Free", then, would characterize a belief rather than a fact.

**RS:** That's a non sequitur and I disagree with it. Whether a certain person has a certain freedom is a factual question. It is a fact about the social situation, and therefore refers to what various people think and how they are disposed to act in certain circumstances. But that does not make it less factual or less objective. Just because people must perceive and then analyze and interpret their sense impressions, that doesn't mean the results cannot be facts. They are not perfectly objective, but perfection is not found in the real world, so it is an inappropriately high standard. It is too much to ask. We must content ourselves with the imperfect facts we can get, and recognize that "imperfect" does not mean "worthless".

**PM:** Should we thus be confident that the FS philosophy is able to inspire law making?

**RS:** We can observe the fact that it has done so. Many countries have considered laws inspired by the free software movement; one is being written now in Venezuela, but there are already others. The free software movement operates on the ethical plane; it says that certain kinds of conduct are wrong, and others are right. That can be a reason to change laws.

**PM:** Many people seem to believe that FS is economically impractical, maybe because they get confused with the very word "free" — which you explain extensively in your book *Free Software: Free Society*). Maybe also because FS is based on what one is willing to do for the sake of others. These are two obstacles that may contribute representing FS as delusory and in the long run purposeless. What then would be needed is an explanation of how economically relevant FS is. If (ignorant) people believe "it can't work", even when it actually does, they will "betamax" it, and other worse options will be chosen instead, blocking the system.

**RS:** If people think that the social system of free software doesn't work, or that the existing free software doesn't run, we need to show them the fact: they DO work. However, that's not the main response we need to make to a mistaken general assumption.

Freedom does not need "economic relevance" as a justification. If people assume it does, we must denounce their assumption, not accept it. In fact the term "economic justification" seems erroneous, because economics does not purport to say what is just. It purports to say what is possible, not what is right.

Thus, what we say to people who think free software can't be any good is this: "If your theories say that the free software community is impossible, they must be wrong, because they conflict with the facts. We can show you that it does work. How to reconcile your theory with this fact is not our problem." *Justification* is an entirely separate issue, an ethical one. To show that proprietary software is not justified, we present ethical arguments.

**PM:** So much for the conflict between proprietary and free software. What now about the debate between FS and "open source software" (OS) on the one hand, FS and "Creative Commons" (CC) on the other? I don't suppose OS and CC are equivalent notions. So I guess the terms of the debate opposing FS to OS are not equivalent to the terms of the debate opposing FS to CC. In my view, FS is opposed to OS as freedom to efficiency. Is this correct?

**RS:** I think the word "opposed" does not fit. The free software movement isn't opposed to open source, we just disagree with its basic values. The open source philosophy says that it is a useful thing for software to be free, but declines to treat the question in ethical terms. It defines a minimum standard of freedoms, not quite the same as the definition of free software but close, but it does not raise the question of whether it is unethical to deny others those freedoms. Creative Commons is even further away from our views. It does not define any minimum standard of freedoms.

**PM:** Then while at the center of the FS philosophy we find "freedom", at the center of the CC philosophy we would find "normativity"?

**RS:** I don't understand "normativity" in this context, but I have doubts about that description of CC. CC's stated goal is to enable copyright holders to exercise their legal powers more flexibly. In effect, it shows them how to be less restrictive, to treat the public better, if they wish to do so. That is a useful step, in that it makes it easier for a copyright holder to avoid doing what I consider wrong. But CC itself doesn't say that it's wrong. CC doesn't make any statements about ethics. Whatever license choice the copyright holder makes, CC does not condemn it.

**PM:** If some practices are "right" and others "wrong", then indeed it appears the problem we are dealing with is "ethical". Doesn't this imply that FS or CC are not just practical solutions, but also two various sets of ideological choices?

**RS:** The FS movement stands for a political position, but CC does not have one, except perhaps implicitly to legitimize the status quo. CC expresses no opinions for or against various ways of licensing works. It says it aims to help copyright holders do whatever they wish to do. And therein lies the main disparity between the FS movement and CC. The basic idea of the FS movement is that there are certain freedoms that every user must have. There is NO standard of users' freedom that Creative Commons stands for.

**PM:** Isn't there a CC "philosophy" that's supposed to inspire new sets of laws?

**RS:** As far as I know, CC doesn't advocate any changes in laws; it does not need any. It operates within existing laws. We must not identify "Free Culture" with Creative Commons. The Free Culture Movement is comparable to what Open Source says about software: it encourages development of works that qualify as free, by a certain standard. Creative Commons does no such thing. Creative Commons says its mission is to help copyright holders use their power more flexibly. It never says it aims to limit their power in any way.