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ARBEITSVORHABEN

Liberty, Authority, and Responsibility

The value of human liberty and the need to protect it lie at the heart of liberalism. For classical liberals, there are two special threats to our liberty: command and coercion. Rousseau claimed that nothing is worse than being subject to the will of another, and many would agree that being either under their authority or subject to their menace is bad in a special way. Anthropologists have described societies governed by complex social rules though devoid of commands backed up by coercion, and anarchists have argued that such societies are preferable to our own.

I want to defend the classical liberal problematic against critics who allege that it ignores the threat to human liberty from other more insidious but more important forms of social power. This will involve arguing that human beings have an interest in being responsible for their own acts and that both command and coercion threaten to deprive us of this responsibility as other social norms do not. My diagnosis casts light on the authority exercised by sovereign over subject, officer over soldier, employer over employee, master over slave, and perhaps parent over child, too.

Classical liberals sought to legitimize state authority by appeal to consent. Some forms of social authority (e.g. employment) are legitimated by consent and it is a question whether all forms of social authority must be so legitimated. Can soldiers be conscripted and can people be subject to the authority of a ruler simply because they were born into the relevant territory, or must these things happen by agreement? And are there limits to the kind of authority that can be authorised by consent? For example, can people sell themselves into slavery? My project will address these questions.

Recommended Reading

Owens, David. *Shaping the Normative Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

–. *Normativity and Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

–. *Bound by Convention*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

The Fragmentation of Justice and the Direction of History

Achieving justice and eliminating injustice should, it is widely thought, be our first political priority. Political philosophers have constructed theories of justice, theories about the political values which should govern our collective decision making. For Liberal Egalitarians liberty, equality, democracy and scientific knowledge are the favoured political values. Writers like John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin aimed to demonstrate the unity of these values – their possession of a common rationale in a certain conception of society and the human person – and thereby establish their priority over important non-political values such as economic prosperity or demographic sustainability.

I shall argue that there can be no such theory of justice because the values which form the various elements of our conception of justice are mutually independent. What unites these elements and gives them priority over non-political values is not their internal logic but rather contingent socio-historical facts about which values our community can coalesce around. This is the fragmentation of justice.

For Liberal Egalitarians there is a direction in which human history, or at least our political history, ought to be moving, one defined by their theory of justice. In the 1990s, it seemed as if humanity might indeed be travelling in the direction they recommend, that the arc of history bent towards liberal democracy. Such optimism has since dissipated, but we should query the philosophical as well as the historical premise behind it: does political morality really recommend a particular direction of travel to all of humanity? The fragmentation of justice suggests otherwise, and in this presentation, I will sketch another picture of history.

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Bound by convention : obligation and social rules

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Normativity and Control

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