

Modern political theory

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Freedom, one of our most common and powerful concepts, is used (and misused) with extraordinarily little appreciation of its significance. Not only is freedom poorly understood, but we are falsely confident that we do understand it (Dudley 24). One of my main goals in this paper, therefore, is to explain it. In order to do so, freedom ought to be understood or conceived by comparison.

In preparation for these interpretations, the paper will consider very briefly the two most important conceptions of freedom on which Mill and Nietzsche build. The first and less comprehensive of these two is that of liberalism. The second, which is more comprehensive than that of liberalism, is that of Nietzsche. The purpose of this paper is to consider the relationships between the conceptions of freedom developed by Mill and Nietzsche. These conceptions, while undeniably different, are complementary.

Nietzsche believed that freedom is one of the fundamental problems. But not freedom understood in conventional or political terms. Freedom for Nietzsche depends upon both moral virtue and intellectual virtue, yet it is neither exercised in or nor achieved through political life. That does not mean that Nietzsche's account of freedom is devoid of political implications. To the contrary, his peculiar identification of freedom with philosophy and mastery reflects a rank order of values in which political liberty and legal slavery are essentially indistinguishable—both, from the perspective afforded by the commanding heights above political life where the free spirit dwells, are equally forms of unfreedom.

Addressing a "serious word" to "the most serious," Nietzsche connects freedom to devotion to the truth (BGE 25). While he warns "philosophers
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and friends of knowledge" about the temptation to martyrdom involved in "suffering 'for the truth's sake'!" (BGE 25), he nevertheless indicates that the truth is worth seeking for those fit for freedom and solitude. Whereas scientific knowledge serves life by fostering ignorance, philosophical knowledge seems to undermine life by estranging the knower from society.

Whereas the scientist, a lover of ignorance from Nietzsche's perspective, is destined to a pleasant unfreedom, the philosopher, in Nietzsche's sense of the term a lover of truth, achieves an excruciating freedom through fidelity to his vocation. This fidelity consists in a measured skepticism directed toward all doctrines, accompanied by a prudent withdrawal from political life.

The free spirit's knowledge and freedom are not the highest of which human beings are capable. The highest awaits the advent of a "new species of philosophers" (BGE 42-44). These future philosophers are especially characterized by the risky experiments they undertake. They probably will be "friends of 'truth'" and very likely will love "their truths," but, Nietzsche insists, they "will certainly not be dogmatists" (BGE 43).

By this he does not mean that the new philosophers will lack beliefs they hold to be true, but rather that they will refrain from insisting that what is true for them must be "a truth for everyman." Yet so far from reflecting a leveling doctrine that celebrates the equality or dignity of all opinions, Nietzsche's understanding of dogmatism is rooted in the deeply aristocratic view that only the "higher type of man" is fit to hear, and to live in accordance with, the highest insights (BGE 30).

While the free spirit remains the new philosopher's herald and precursor (BGE 44), there is a chasm on the opposite side between the freedom of the free spirit (der Freie Geist) and the freedom of the "falsely so-called 'free spirits,'" that is, the freethinkers (Freidenker), the democrats, all the "goodly advocates of 'modern ideas'" (BGE 44). Free thinkers reveal their unfreedom in their "basic inclination" to see aristocratic political life as the root of all suffering and misfortune.

Nietzsche discovers in the democratic interpretation of political life the same offense against truth that he claims Plato perpetrated, for it is "a way of standing truth happily up on her head" (BGE 44). Democratic freethinkers, wishing to spread material prosperity, guarantee comfort and security, establish universal equality, and most characteristically abolish suffering, are blind to the rank order of human types and hence enslaved to ignorance.

What is so terrible from Nietzsche's point of view in the promotion of democratic, bourgeois notions of the good is not simply that the democratic interpretation of man is false but rather that, like Socrates' theoretical interpretation of reality and Christianity's religious interpretation of the world, the democratic interpretation cripples those of high rank by poisoning the air that free spirits breathe.

The free spirit is educated and elevated not by material prosperity but by deprivation, not by comfort and security but by fear and isolation, not by equality but by slavery, not by the abolition of suffering but by the release of "everything evil, terrible, tyrannical in man," and not by happiness but by "malice against the lures of dependence that lie hidden in honors, or money, or offices, or enthusiasms of the senses" (BGE 44). Nietzsche knows of no

interest that supersedes, recognizes no right that limits, and sees no good beside that of the higher type. This is not a matter of calculation but of principle.

Embracing as his own the struggle to return truth to her feet and restore her dignity, Nietzsche defends truth's honor by challenging not only Plato but Christianity, the form in which Platonism has conquered Europe. The struggle against Christianity has opened up tremendous new possibilities; it " has created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit, the like of which has never yet existed on earth."

Note that Nietzsche not only makes philosophy, and its political reflection in Christianity, responsible for the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors, but, in proclaiming that " with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals," he also finds in philosophy the source of his highest hope (Dudley 31). That most distant goal, which he speculates is only now coming into view for " good Europeans, and free, very free spirits," among whom he classes himself, is a philosophy of the future.

Platonism and Christianity granted human beings a sense of security as individuals. Christianity did this by promising a beatific afterlife as a reward for the proper conduct of this life. Platonism gave the individual the hope that individual limitations could be transcended by rational insight which, when fully developed, could transport the soul to an experience of the ultimate, atemporal reality. Christianity and Platonism offered the individual a sense that the activities of this life were meaningful by referring them to unchanging realities outside life.

The Platonic-Christian interpretation of individual existence is, in a sense, already dead, according to Nietzsche. The members of the modern world do not really experience their lives as meaningful as a consequence of these traditions' extrawordly visions. But modern human beings who have come to believe that this world is the only world, this life the only life the individual will ever experience, are likely to be disturbed by this insight. Our Platonic and Christian background has given us the sense that our activities have meaning, yet the ground of that meaning no longer seems available.

Nietzsche's version of this critique of liberalism is implicit in his discussions of decadence. For the decadent subject, it turns out, is precisely one whose will fails to be self-determining. Free will is reserved for, and is the determining characteristic of, the noble subject, with whom Nietzsche contrasts the decadent. Nietzsche's discussions of decadence and nobility can thus fruitfully be understood as addressing the question of the necessary requirements of a free will.

Nietzsche also recognizes, like Mill, that even the most freely willing subject remains incompletely free, and that an adequate account of freedom must therefore discuss the activities that provide a liberation that willing cannot. Nietzsche's account of the limitations of willing is implicit in his critique of nobility. The noble subject manages to will freely, but nonetheless remains externally determined and so incompletely free.

This incomplete freedom of nobility is overcome only by those individuals and communities able to develop the stance that Nietzsche characterizes as tragic. Nietzsche understands the development of the tragic stance required by freedom to depend upon philosophy. He thus agrees with Mill that

freedom is not only treated in philosophical works, but also produced through philosophical practice.

Mill's discussion of liberty focuses on when society may impose constraints on individuals, rather than on the nature of constraint. Accordingly, his discussion generally refers to intentional, rather than unintentional, constraints on individuals. Nevertheless, Mill believes that customs and traditions are constraining. To the extent that these are the unintentional results of human life, he is committed to the view that some constraint is unintentional.

Mill has argued that the social tyranny of others which takes place in moral coercion, custom, and tradition is one of the most important constraints that people face today (Mill 1956: 7). For instance, if people express their views that homosexuality or polygamy ought to be allowed, but their neighbors and employers strongly disagree (even though the government does not), they may be constrained in their actions and lifestyles. Finding work may be more difficult; access to housing may be blocked. They may feel themselves compelled to move to other cities or countries to live. Thus, though early liberalism placed great emphasis on the limitation of freedom by physical constraint, it is false to maintain that it has only done this.

Mill is simply much more sensitive than Nietzsche in recognizing that social pressure may be "more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" (Mill 1956: 7). Further, Mill's view has been dominant amongst liberals. Morality, custom, tradition, and the law are

viewed as constraints on people's freedom. One is less free to the extent that he or she is constrained by any of these institutions.

The implication of the preceding expanded concept of constraint is that any narrow or restricted model of liberal freedom can no longer be defended. Once the Pandora's box of constraints is opened, the thrust and momentum of this view is not to be detoured. The burden will always be placed on the person who claims not to see an obstacle by those who claim to see the obstacle and claim that their activity is hindered, retarded, or impeded by that obstacle.

Some liberals have tried to stem this tide, but they fight an overwhelming flood. The thrust of liberalism is such that if an obstacle can be humanly removed, then it will be seen as inhibiting someone's freedom if it is not removed. The upshot is an enormous extension in the number and kinds of constraints to which people are thought to be subject. The implications of this are of the first importance.

There remains one essential aspect of the liberal determination of when constraints may be imposed on other individuals. How directly or indirectly may individuals impose injuries on themselves or others without being legitimately subject to restraint in the name of freedom? To decide this issue is part and parcel of the liberal attempt to define a sphere of privacy as opposed to publicity - a private realm of freedom, in which people may act, think, and relate to consenting others without constraints imposed by others. In this private realm, and only in this private realm, may that ideal of complete freedom be most fully realized.

Mill refers to such a sphere of personal, private life, where society may not legitimately interfere as “ the appropriate region of human liberty” (Mill 1956: 16). In this realm, Mill says, “ in the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill 1956: 13).

Nietzsche's philosophical practice, however, is quite obviously not the same as Mill's. Mill's philosophy is always systematic philosophy. Nietzschean philosophy is resolutely unsystematic. And thus, although Mill and Nietzsche agree that philosophy has a role to play in our liberation, the liberating roles that they envision for philosophy, and consequently their conceptions of freedom itself, are significantly different.

Works Cited

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