



PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
 UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David

Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment Coversheet & Feedback Form

[Please insert this coversheet as the first page of the assignment you are submitting]

For completion by the student: Student Name: Adam Smith		
Module code: CSPH7041	Student University Number:	Educational support needs: YES OR NO
Module title: Self & Society	1806281	NO
Module tutor: Dr Rebekah Humphreys		
Assignment title: Critically evaluate the relationship between the values of individual autonomy, freedom and equality?		
Assignment due date: 31 August 2019		
I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism. Name: Adam Smith		

Assignment Mark1st Marker's Provisional mark2nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark

External Examiner mark (if relevant)

Final Mark**NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board****For completion by Marker 1:**

Comments:

Marker 1 signature:

Date:

For completion by Marker 2 / Moderator:

Comments:

Marker 2 / Moderator signature:

Date:

External Examiner's comments (if relevant):

External Examiner signature:	Date:
------------------------------	-------

Critically evaluate the relationship between the values of individual autonomy, freedom and equality?

Autonomy, freedom and equality are core components of modern political philosophy. Since they reflect the tensions between self and society, Enlightenment thinkers used these values to underpin their development of liberalism. Rather as Copernicus depicted the forces that hold the universe together, liberal philosophers envision a social system in which the conflicts between freedom and equality are mediated, for example by autonomy.

This paper proceeds through three analyses: although the nub of the question is about the relationship between the three values, I need to start by, if not defining then at least characterising the three concepts. A second section attempts to draw out the relationship between them. Finally, I attempt to highlight some contested or contingent aspects of the relationships outlined.

The notion of “autonomy” can be understood etymologically as combining *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law). The term was first used to describe the

Greek city-state, which had *autonomia* when its citizens made their own laws, as opposed to being dominated by some foreign power. Today, autonomy appears in various contexts but the question specifically asks about individual autonomy (not, for example, moral or cultural autonomy). By extrapolation from the original meaning then, individual autonomy can be said to refer to the extent to which a person is making their own way in life, not subject to some extraneous power. In other words, are they a self-governing agent?

This absence of external manipulation or distortion sounds at first blush like some kind of freedom, in a wide sense: free from external domination. However, when we explore more fully the criteria for autonomy, we find that it is somehow anterior to the concept of freedom. We can say that autonomy concerns the independence and authenticity of the desire to act in a certain way, whereas freedom implies the ability to implement that action (the absence of impediments, perhaps the availability of resources) (Berlin, 1969). I am autonomous when I decide for myself that I want to go for a ride on my bike: I am not free to do so when I discover that someone has stolen it.

Dworkin (1988) notes that “‘autonomy’ is used in an exceedingly broad fashion. It is used sometimes as an equivalent of liberty (positive or negative in Berlin’s terminology), sometimes as equivalent to self-rule or sovereignty, sometimes as identical with freedom of the will”. He considers the relationship with liberty and draws a distinction between first- and second-order desires: “To consider only the promotion or hindrance of first-order desires, which is what we focus upon in considering the voluntariness of action, is to ignore a crucial feature of persons, their ability to reflect upon and adopt attitudes towards their first-order desires, wishes and intentions”. Thus, Odysseus has a second-order desire that his first-order desire be frustrated, so he asks to be bound to the mast, thereby curtailing his freedom. Dworkin concludes that “autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences ... and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values.”

Freedom, like autonomy, begs the question “free to do what?” Freedom of speech, free will, freedom of action? Hobbes says that a person is free when he finds “no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe” (1651/1997). The advantage of this notion is that it fits with the distinction made above between the desire and the ability to execute the

desire through action. Similarly, Locke (1690/1975) says that “the Idea of Liberty, is the Idea of a Power in any Agent to do or forbear any Action, according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is preferr’d to the other”. Here, we again have the idea of agency (involving a desire to do or to forbear), and a power to carry out that desire. Agency could be said to be a proxy for autonomy in this context, and liberty seems to be synonymous with freedom, just coming from a Germanic rather than a Latin root.

Similarly, Comte-Sponville (2005) distinguishes freedom *to do* from freedom *to choose* (which seems to overlap with autonomy). In the voting booth, you are free to vote for any candidate, “but are you also free to choose to vote for this candidate or that?” (59). His point is that we are the prisoners of the causes which determine our choices. Comte-Sponville believes that freedom is ultimately a question of learning, and of freeing ourselves, becoming free, and in this sense, “freedom is but another name, as we can see in Spinoza, for wisdom” (69).

To draw out further the relationship with autonomy, it might be pertinent to reflect on Berlin's distinction between the 'concepts' of positive and negative freedom (Berlin, 1969). Negative freedom is the absence of coercion: the freedom to live as one prefers. Since individuals exist in societies governed by laws, negative freedom is inevitably curtailed to some extent in order to protect all members of the society and so absolute negative freedom is impossible. Berlin believed negative freedom was an end in itself (a 'source of value') rather than a means to something else. Positive freedom, on the other hand, "is the *freedom to* do certain things while negative freedom is *freedom from* having to do them" (Putterman, 2006: 420, emphasis his). In this sense, a fetter on my (negative) freedom seems to detract from my autonomy (I have to do certain things, irrespective of my desire to do otherwise).

Equality is the most multi-faceted and ambiguous of the three terms. "People who praise it or disparage it disagree about what they are praising or disparaging" (Dworkin 2000, 2). Like the other terms, "equality" begs the question, equality of what? Moreover, absolute equality being impossible (since that is identity not equality), there are necessarily limits on the extent to which two properties or objects are equal. Describing the limits is often the

task of history or economics, whereas deciding where such limits are drawn is often the prescriptive function of social or political philosophy.

Wollheim and Berlin (1955) note that “it would seem that in the course of history two quite distinct political principles have been advanced of which both can make a good claim to be regarded as the principle of Equality”. Taking the example of property rights, they characterise these two principles as (i) every man has a right to equal property and (ii) every man has an equal right to property. The first leads to an extreme egalitarian society, whereas a society could adopt the second view without being egalitarian at all.

This distinction highlights another characteristic of equality: unlike the two other terms, which can relate to the individual alone, equality by definition implies more than one actor, since it describes a tripartite relation between two or more objects and one or more quality: ‘equality’ describes the extent to which the two objects share the same quality. Thus, whilst there can be fetters on one’s freedom or autonomy that are not due to social factors (as an example, addiction), equality can only be curtailed in a social context.

Autonomy and equality are both somehow related to what it means to be human. For instance, Rawls restates his theory of justice on the basis of “rationally autonomous agents subject to reasonable constraints agree[ing] to public principles of justice” (1980, 554). This is because autonomy is “one of the elements of well-being (Mill, 1859/1975, III) and part of what it means to live a human life. In the same way, egalitarians tend to relate the notion of equality to our fundamental humanity: “all men are created equal”, as the US Declaration of Independence holds. Whether this descriptive statement actually delivers prescriptive guarantees of equality is another matter.

An analysis of the relationship between the three terms under consideration inevitably points to their coming of age during the Enlightenment, and to their subsequent incorporation into the dominant Western models of political and moral thinking. Whilst the West has produced competing notions of political and social ideals, such differences are more about the weight or interpretation given to each of these three concepts than about a rejection of all or any of them. For example, it seems difficult to conceive of a viable school of modern Western political thought that would not assume some kind of equality of human worth of its subjects. Of course, the point remains: what kind of equality.

In this third section, I aim to spotlight some features of the three values that conflict or are otherwise seen as being problematic. In the first place, “communitarians, feminists, theorists of identity politics, and others have claimed ... that the model of the autonomous agent upon which liberal principles are built assumes a conception of human identity, value, and commitment which is blind to .. the fundamentally relational nature of our motivations, and the overall social character of our being” (Christman, 2004). The allegation is that over-emphasis on individual autonomy leads a hyper-individualistic form of liberalism and that the remedy is to redefine a form of ‘relational autonomy’ that sees persons as relational and socially-constituted in fundamental ways. Christman asks us to be wary of the claim that that “being autonomous means standing in proper social relations to surrounding others and within social practices and institutions” since this may bring in by the back door the very paternalism that a concern for autonomy strives to exclude. Instead, we just need to accept that “social conditions that enable us to develop and maintain the powers of authentic choice and which protect the ongoing inter-personal and social relationships that define ourselves are all part of the background requirements for the development of autonomy” (id, 158).

Thus, Nelson (2010) arrives at a “minimally externalist definition of autonomy” that “acknowledge[s] the hermeneutic relationship between individual and social processes of belief adjudication” (333). His is a “conception of autonomy that takes social oppression seriously without sapping autonomy of its valuable focus on individual self-direction” (334) in the context of education.

The second contested aspect that I would like to address is also related to the social aspect, but as it relates to freedom rather than autonomy. As has been shown, a belief in the value of (mostly negative) freedom underlies Western liberal politics and culture. However, it happens that I am writing this paper in China, where the primacy of freedom as a value is called into question. This is not the place to fully elaborate what ‘freedom’ means in a Chinese context but it is notable that Chinese citizens have (willingly or otherwise) accepted substantial fetters on their negative freedom, perhaps as the price to pay for achieving a kind of positive freedom that comes from escaping the poverty that blighted previous generations. The Chinese State’s use of data (both in the context of the Great Firewall and of policies of ‘social credit’) can be seen

as a modern version of a Panopticon: the Chinese pedestrian waits for the traffic lights because she never knows whether the surveillance camera is turned on or not, but feels that Westerners ‘lack discipline’ and that obedience to law benefits her because everyone else acts similarly. Rousseau claimed that “obedience to the law one prescribes to oneself is freedom” (1762/1977) but we should be wary of assuming that our Western calculus of freedom is the only valid one.

A third counterpoint is the perceived conflict between equality (in the sense of the distribution of scarce resources) and freedom. In the early nineteenth century, Western thinkers believed that political intervention to reduce inequality required a compromise of individual freedom (Taylor, 2004). Fortunately, Mill and Green found a solution to the dilemma by showing that state intervention could create conditions in which individual freedom was enlarged. Indeed, Green (1881/1911) believed that freedom was an inherent human potentiality that could only flourish when embedded in a supportive society.

Finally, staying on the tension between freedom and equality, Christophe Premat (2008) situates autonomy as a balance between freedom and equality. Premat starts by noting that inequality appears to be an integral part of the social fabric because of man's desire to dominate others. To remedy inequality, humanity constructs a political order based on a social compact. "The social compact preeminently affords access to individual and social autonomy, for it entails limiting one's desires and actions to avoid encroaching on other people's territory" (682). However, as noted above, such systems may restrict freedom: "freedom and equality seem to be the infernal duo today: the more individual freedom is increased, the more the principle of equality seems to be impaired; the more we try to strengthen equality, the more the freedom of individuals and of their communities is restricted" (685). Premat sees autonomy as "basically a quest for collective intelligence" (693) since "collective intelligence, fostered by social autonomy, can create institutions designed to combat and redress social inequalities (ibid). In this way, "autonomy is the precondition for the exercise of public freedom and the guarantee of greater equality between the various conditions of individuals" (ibid), provided that, by 'autonomy', we accept Premat's social version of it. This argument parallels what Ronald Dworkin refers to as the notion of equal respect: autonomy as a means to oppose paternalistic views.

The liberal tradition is underpinned by a belief in the value of freedom, whilst accepting that individual freedom has to be constrained in order for society to function and to prevent one person's exercise of freedom impinging on another's. A social compact delivers institutions that arbitrate between these freedoms, the most fundamental of which is a system of justice founded on the postulate that citizens have equality of rights, even if they do not end up with equality of resources. There is thus a tension between freedom and equality, but this can be mitigated either by re-situating 'freedom' qua Green, or by using concept of social autonomy to mediate between the two. Individual autonomy, as the phrase implies, is a more internal value; less subject to social constraints and more tied to notions of the self; autonomy allows us, as Nietzsche entreates, to become who we are. The triumvirate of these three values is a characteristic feature of modernity, but the importance that is given to the relationship between them differs from one form of modern society to another.

Bibliography

Berlin, Isaiah, 1969. "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 118-72

Christman, John, 2004. "Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 117: 1/2

Compte-Sponville, André, 2005. *The Little Book of Philosophy*, Vintage

Hobbes, Thomas, 1651/1997. *Leviathan*, R.E. Flatman & D. Johnston (eds.), Norton

Dworkin, Gerald, 1988. 'The nature of Autonomy' in *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 3-20

Dworkin, Ronald, 2000. *Sovereign Virtue. The Theory and Practice of Equality*, Harvard University Press

Green, Thomas Hill, 1881/1911. *The Works of Thomas Hill Green*, Longmans, Green & Co

Locke, John, 1690/1975, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed. Peter H

Mill, John Stuart, 1859/1975. *On Liberty*, David Spitz, ed. New York: Norton

Nelson, Peter, 2010. "Oppression, Autonomy and the Impossibility of the Inner Citadel", *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29, 333-349

Premat, Christophe, 2006. "Autonomy as a balance of freedom and equality", *International Social Science Journal*, 58(190), 681-695.

Putterman, Theodore L, 2006. "Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty: A Reassessment and Revision", *Polity*, 38:3 (Jul 2006), 416-446

Rawls, John, 1980. "Construction and Objectivity", *Journal of Philosophy*, 78, 554-572

Rousseau, Jean Jaques, 1762/1977. "Of the Social Contract' in S. Cahn (ed.), *Classics of Modern Political Theory*, Oxford University Press, 1997

Taylor, Charles, 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press

Wollheim, Richard and Isaiah Berlin, 1955. "Equality", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, 56, 281-326