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Student Name: Emmanouil Pantelidakis

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Module tutor: Dr Rebekah Humphreys

Assignment title: Critically evaluate the relationship between the values of individual autonomy, freedom and equality.

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Name: Emmanouil Pantelidakis

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

To say that I act autonomously means that I act according to a law I give myself, as opposed to acting according to nature or social convention. In contrast, to act according to laws nature or society impose upon me, means to act heteronomously. By laws of nature I mean our biological needs. Let us say that I sit in the sofa of my living room and at some point realize that I feel thirsty. I get up, walk to the kitchen, grab a glass, open the tap, pour water into the glass and, finally, drink the water. One can say that this sequence of simple acts were not decided and executed by me, but by my biological need to satisfy my thirst. I did not resist the satisfaction of this need but went along with its instructions. My act was a heteronomous act as it was not really decided by me, but by nature. Similarly, imagine that I get an invitation to a job interview for my dream job in banking. To go to the interview, despite it being a very hot day, I put on a suit and a tie, although my personal preference would have been to wear something lighter. My act of choosing clothes was heteronomously determined by a social convention.

A heteronomously determined act cannot be an act of freedom. To the contrary, it is an act that highlights the limits of our freedom. I did not choose in freedom to go and drink a glass of water, but I was forced to do so driven by the need to satisfy the feeling of thirst. Similarly, I did not choose to wear a tie, but was forced to wear a tie by a powerful social convention. A good number of acts that are conventionally considered as acts of freedom are in fact heteronomously determined acts of enslavement to passions and desires. Consider, for example, the person who likes to indulge himself in overconsumption of alcohol. He can see it as an act of freedom: "it is my body and I am free to do whatever I want with it, including to drink as much alcohol as I like. I am not hurting anybody except my own body, I do not engage in anti-social behaviour as a result of alcohol intoxication and I am prepared to pay for any required medical treatment with my own funds, not burdening the NHS budget". There is no doubt that he has the right to say all this and do all this. The utilitarian John Stuart Mill must be satisfied as the requirements of his Golden rule are met: The person is exercising his right to freedom to do whatever he likes up to the point

where he is not infringing on the rights of others¹. Equally, libertarians (say Nozick²) would identify with his claim to do whatever he likes with his body, including to hurt it, due to his ownership rights on it. But Kant would not agree. Far from exercising any freedoms, such a person has merely succumbed to his passion for the consumption of alcohol beyond levels that are known to be consistent with good health. He lost his freedom and became slave to a passion of his. What is then the criterion for a free act? Just to say that it must be acting in accordance to a law I, not nature or society, set to myself is not enough.

Kant said that a free act is an act that is made on the basis of reason³. As humans, the most perfect of the animals but an animal nonetheless, our behaviour is determined much of the time by a wish to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This is a decision rule we share with animals. On the other hand, the capacity to reason is a uniquely human characteristic. To go back to the example of the person drinking too much alcohol, it is within his power to reason his way out of it. He can develop a series of logical arguments for why to give in to his desire for alcohol is against his long term self-interest. For example, he can decide that to secure a good job and provide more to his family matters more to him than the pleasure he extracts from consuming too much alcohol. When, after such thinking, he decides to reduce his alcohol consumption, this act is an act of real freedom. Free from the oppression of desire. Seen in this light, freedom can be flowing from each of us individually, without consideration for societal constraints.

John Locke, one of the founding fathers of liberalism, thought that only law protects freedom as it protects the individual from being subjected to the arbitrary will of another person or authority⁴. However, Locke has been criticized for overemphasizing property rights. Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw freedom as compliance to laws one has had part in making⁵. The individual's submission to the General Will is seen by Rousseau as the guarantee to her freedom. However, this position has been challenged by proponents of minority rights. John Stuart Mill

¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and other essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

² Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), translated by H.J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964).

⁴ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government and a Letter concerning Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1998).

defended the right of the individual to be free from societal coercions. Society, Mill's argument goes, can only coerce an individual in order to prevent harm to others⁶.

Isaiah Berlin divides freedom into two varieties, 'positive' and 'negative'; with positive freedom defined as the freedom to realize one's deepest desires and potentialities and negative freedom being the individual's freedom from external obstacles such as slavery, legal or cultural restraint⁷. Milton Friedman, the libertarian economist, emphasized freedom as the absence of governmental coercions⁸. Imagine life in the Soviet Union or in North Korea. You want to travel abroad but in the vast majority of cases cannot, you want to protest against a government decision but are faced with long prison sentences if you do so. Seen in this light, freedom is in the hands of governments who decide to deliver it or to limit it. No matter how much a person has dominated over his animal instincts and based his decision making on reason, he still does not enjoy freedom because governments do not let him flourish.

Why would governments want to limit the freedoms of their citizens? A very popular reason has historically been in the name of equality. In older times governments abstained from the responsibility to promote equality. This task was left to God: "all people are equal in the eyes of God". Rich or poor, powerful or weak, will be judged by God fairly, according to their deeds in compliance with religious requirements. In modern times governments assumed a hands-on approach in promoting equality, apparently at the expense of freedom. Two are the main versions of equality that have been promoted: Equality of outcome and equality of opportunity.

Equality of outcome refers to the explicit targeting of the final equality outcome in a society. Such has been popular in the communist states of the Soviet Union, China, North Korea and other Marxism inspired regimes. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" wrote Karl Marx in his 1875 Critique of the Gotha Program⁹. Imagine a country with just 102 citizens: Natasha, Sergey and 100 others. Natasha and Sergey are singers and sing every evening at separate venues, where guests have to pay 1,000 roubles each to listen to one or the other. Natasha is a talented singer but Sergey is not. On the first night of their shows, 50 guests go

⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and other essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

⁸ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

⁹ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (New York: International Publishers, 2003).

to listen to Natasha and 50 to listen to Sergey. On the second day of their shows, 70 people go to listen to Natasha and the rest go to Sergei. As their respective reputations spread through the country, by the third night everybody goes to listen to Natasha only. After three nights of performances Natasha earned 220,000 roubles (50,000 on first night, 70,000 on second night and 100,000 on the third night), whilst Sergey made just 80,000 roubles (50,000 on first night and 30,000 on the second night). If the central planners of their country were targeting equality of outcome, they would be disturbed to see that Natasha, *ceteris paribus*, is now 140,000 roubles richer than Sergei. To achieve equality of outcome they would need to confiscate 70,000 roubles from Natasha's three-day revenues and distribute them to Sergey as compensation for his underperformance. Is this compulsory governmental intervention, essentially a loss of freedom of Natasha to deal with the results of her labour as she wishes, fair?

On the face of it, it is not. Natasha made more money because she is a better singer and people extract more utility by listening to good singers than to bad. But why is she a better singer? Is it because she was blessed by nature with a good voice or is it because she practiced her singing more hours than Sergey? If the first is the case, then we can say that she is lucky. If the latter is the case, then her success is the result of hard work. Does it make it any easier to say that it is fair to confiscate part of Natasha's revenues, if her singing talents are due to luck and not hard work? For many people it would make it easier, although I think a majority would be very upset if someone informed them on the moment of winning the lottery that most of the proceeds will be confiscated and distributed to those who need the monies more. On the other hand, one can make an argument that even the ability to put in long hours of hard work are the result of the good fortune to benefit from parents who promoted at the crucial childhood years a hard work ethos and provided for privileged access to high quality education. In other words, one can make a case that luck is the key factor, sometimes more easily detectable (as in the case of "natural talent") and some other times more indirectly detectable (when masquerading as "hard work"). It seems to me that this line of reasoning denies humans of free will, and therefore responsibility for our actions. We are mere automata in a long line of causation. While this sort of equality of outcome ideal has been popular in the Marxist revolutions of the previous century, it never really found much audience in the

western world where another, freedom preserving, approach to equality was advanced.

Equality of opportunity has been the Western European and North American alternative. Recognizing the strong dis-incentives of equality of outcome approaches (“why should I try to better myself, if in the end I will find myself in an equal position as those who did not try to better themselves”), a role is recognized for governments to intervene to correct unequal access to opportunities. This intervention typically limits the rights and freedoms of those deemed to be in a more favourable position in the pre-intervention state, in order to promote the rights and freedom of those deemed to be in a disadvantageous initial state. Suppose that a peaceful revolution is taking place in Natasha’s and Sergey’s country, under pressure from those more talented people who can no longer accept stoically to see the product of their talent and labour to be confiscated and redistributed. Further pressure also is coming from those who can no longer endure Sergey’s bad singing. The central governing council of the country decides that instead of confiscating Natasha’s legally earned wealth to bring her in a state of equality with Sergey, they will offer to Sergey extra support in his bid to become a better singer and compete with Natasha for guests to their entertainment shows. Suppose that the country has a budget that can provide for free tuition for singing lessons of 100 hours per year. Both Natasha and Sergey apply to these lessons but the central governing council decides to allocate to Sergey 90 of those hours and to Natasha a mere 10 hours. These extra free hours of singing lessons are seen as some sort of compensation to Sergey for his bad luck to not be endowed with a naturally good voice and/or as some sort of compensation for not being born into a family that was keen to nurture his singing interest. Where exactly is freedom being lost in this new set-up, one might ask? Natasha is having her freedom to attend more hours of free singing lessons severely curtailed: If she turns up that day, in the building where they give those lessons, she will be sent away, in an act of discrimination against her on the basis that somebody else needs these lessons more than she does. However, the new regime offers an important new freedom to Natasha. The freedom to keep the monies earned from the sale of tickets to the guests attending her performances. She is now free to do whatever she wishes with this money, her own money. In the previous regime, she had to hand-over, against her wish, half of her revenues in order to be equal with Sergey. This

freedom to do what she wishes with her own money is significant, and probably weights more to her than the loss of freedom of being able to attend the free singing lessons. Seen from the perspective of Sergey, the new regime offers him better chances to sing better, through intensive free tutoring, but no longer guarantees him equality. It might be that through these lessons Sergey really transforms his singing, becomes popular with guests and can earn a good living without relying on the government to confiscate Natasha's revenues to redistribute to him. But, it is also possible that despite the lessons Sergey fails to improve his singing and therefore being unable to make a living for himself. Left without the redistributive intervention by the government he is now condemned to a life of poverty. Does Sergey deserve this life? Some might say that Sergey is the author of his own drama. Perhaps he did not turn up on time for the lessons, was not paying attention to his teachers, was not doing his homework or simply tried but really there was not any singing talent there to develop. Are these good enough excuses for letting Sergey eventually become homeless and hungry?

What if I was the Sergey of that society? Rawls, the political philosopher, put forward an ingenious thought experiment that brought out the answer to this question. Imagine that I contemplate this question not from my present position but from behind a veil of ignorance where I do not know if in society I will end up in Natasha's privileged or Sergey's weak position¹⁰. If I thought I would be talented, strong and hard-working, I might be tempted to prefer to live in a society where I would be allowed the freedom to flourish with the minimum possible degree of governmental interference. If, on the other hand, I thought I would be born with some disability that would put me in a handicap in a competitive world, I would probably prefer to find myself in a society where I knew there would be governmental intervention to make sure I receive enough support to achieve a reasonable standard of life.

In conclusion, the concepts of individual autonomy, freedom and equality are strongly related with each other. Put most simply, to be autonomous is to be one's own master, directed only by our authentic self. Then we can potentially engage in true acts of freedom. However, the potentiality can remain unrealized in the absence of some degree of equality to ensure one has access to the resources necessary to

¹⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

exercise her freedom. I am free to take flying lessons and rent a small plane to fly over an island but I may never do it as I lack the financial resources to take such lessons and rent a plane. Seen in this way, individual autonomy, freedom and equality can coexist in a symbiotic relationship, that can bring personal accomplishment and social progress. If, on the other hand, autonomy, freedom and equality are in an antagonistic relationship with each other, then the struggle that ensues between those who see themselves as defenders of freedom and those who see themselves as defenders of equality is detrimental to both individuals and societies. This is the sort of relationship between freedom and equality that John Stuart Mill had in mind when he referred to extreme egalitarianism as the greatest threat to individual liberty.

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