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

1. Introduction

This essay is going to examine the values of individual autonomy, freedom, and equality individually at first, to then consider how they impact on each other.

After drawing on Rawls and Berlin to acknowledge some challenges inherent in their reconciliation, I am going to explore Sen's, Williams's and Gaita's work to demonstrate that equally, these values also have the potential to be mutually supportive.

I am going to show that once exclusive focus on distributive justice is abandoned in favour of a broader view, the idea of freedom and equality being mutually supportive is consistent both with Wittgenstein's riverbed model of social interaction and with contemporary research on the effect of minority inclusion on innovation and development.

2. Individual autonomy

Arguably, it is debatable whether individual autonomy even exists. Whether we subscribe to Comte's and Durkheim's functionalism¹, consider the impact of productive forces on human society with Marx², or acknowledge individual action theories standing on the shoulders of Weber³ and merely allow that our own actions are informed by our interpretation of other people's actions – either way, no 1980s miner opposed Margaret Thatcher's policies in isolation. I would argue, however, that autonomy was present nonetheless: although the refusal of some individuals to take part in the strike may be interpreted by determinists as having been caused by differences in their biographies, Kant, on the other hand, would have reminded them of their capacity to choose whether to attach any significance to these.⁴

For the purposes of this essay, I am going to adopt the wider interpretation of individual autonomy, and define it as a capacity for and a right to sovereignty⁵, with societal influence only being regarded as curtailment where the individual is unable to choose whether to attach any significance to it.

3. Freedom

A conception of freedom solely as absence of third-party interference can be unrealistic: theoretically, the homeless person near my place of work is free to apply for jobs, as no person and

¹ S.Seidman, *Contested Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.57-70.

² M.E.Warren, 'Marx And Methodological Individualism', in *Rational Choice Marxism*, ed. by T.Carver and P.Thomas (Basingstoke/London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.243-248.

³ S.Seidman, pp.70-90.

⁴ S.Buss and A.Westlund, "Personal Autonomy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N.Zalta (Spring 2018 edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/personal-autonomy/>> [Accessed: 19 July 2019].

⁵ A.Reath, "Autonomy, Ethical", in *Routledge Encyclopedia Of Philosophy* ed. by Craig,E., Vol. 1(London: Routledge, 1998), p.587.

no legislation stands in her way. In practice, this freedom is of little use to her because an application without an address would be unlikely to be considered.

Isaiah Berlin would frame my example in terms of negative and positive freedom.⁶ The above freedom from interference exemplifies Berlin's negative conception of freedom. A positive definition of freedom, on the other hand, would also require the agent to be free of any internal constraints, and this is unlikely in our example: rejection is bound to have left its mark.

Berlin is wary of the potential political implications of a positive conception of freedom:⁷ once we subordinate the relevance of another individual's empirical self to our belief that we know best what they truly desire, it becomes possible to coerce individuals and entire societies while convincing everyone that we are freeing them to realise their true selves. It is clear from this, before any more detailed consideration (which I am going to defer until section 5 below), that it is thus possible for freedom and individual autonomy to conflict.

MacCallum proposes a basic concept on which positive and negative freedom converge, conceived as a triadic relation between an agent, certain preventing conditions, and certain doings or becomings of the agent⁸. His model does not differentiate between external and internal preventing conditions. For our homeless person, this seems realistic: any internalised rejection would have originated externally, and this would make it futile to look to its psychiatric removal for remedy unless a realistic chance of finding employment is produced as well.

In addition to the above idea of valuing freedom as a means to an end, freedom can be seen as an end in itself: Amartya Sen, for example, points out that freedom has its own importance, "going beyond the value of the state of existence actually achieved".⁹

4. Equality

Hobbes believed it was prudent for human beings to place ourselves under the authority of a state because our approximately equal strength meant we were all capable of killing each other, with our emotional disposition suggesting that we were going to.¹⁰

Less pessimistic interpretations of equality have centred around equal moral worth, and attempted to derive practical ways of living our conviction that all of us are equally worthy of our fair share in any social and material goods on offer.¹¹

The diversity of approaches available reflects our difficulty in reconciling the range of considerations

⁶ I. Berlin, "Two Concepts Of Liberty", in *Freedom*, ed. by N. Warburton, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp.127-136.

⁷ Ibid., p.134

⁸ I. Carter, "Positive And Negative Liberty", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta, (Summer 2018 edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>> [Accessed: 19 July 2019].

⁹ A. Sen, *On Ethics And Economics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p.60.

¹⁰ J. Wolff, *An Introduction To Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.8-13.

¹¹ S. Gosepath, "Equality", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta (Spring 2011 edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/equality/>> [Accessed: 19 July 2019].

involved in this. Who should be included in our project: the entire world in equal measure, or some more than others due to existing, implied, or anticipated social contracts or personal attachments? What social and material goods should be considered, and how should these be valued? Should the opportunity to attain social and material goods be equal, or their actual distribution? How should we manage the transition, bearing in mind that redistribution may involve reneging on existing contracts and overriding existing attachments? Once in place, how should we respond to any disturbances occurring in the course of our model's operation? Last but not least, what criteria would our model have to meet in order to win enough citizens' support to keep it stable enough to warrant the time we spend considering all this?¹²

Rawls would be the first to caution that his proposed model is imperfect: Rawls's reflective equilibrium, where all our beliefs cohere on all levels of generality, is unattainable in practice by Rawls's own judgement, and thus intended as a method of approximation.¹³ His contribution is important nonetheless: not only has it provided critics – including Rawls himself, who went on to revise his theory extensively – with a basis for discussion, but it also addresses most of the points made above in its attempt to do so.

Rawls draws on Locke's and Rousseau's conceptions of human beings as non-Hobbesian, potentially peaceful, albeit largely individual members of society.¹⁴ His theory is based on the idea of reasonable citizens negotiating sustainable, collaborative solutions where a reasonable pluralism may, for example, contain reasonable versions of any religion and none, based on shared fundamental ideas such as religious freedom.¹⁵

The process advocated by Rawls could arguably identify Rawls as a Contractarian, but there is more to him than that: Rawls explicitly acknowledges having drawn on both Utilitarian and Kantian moral reasons for devising his method.¹⁶ As well as then making extensive reference to Mill throughout his work, he reminds us that justice itself (as opposed to his route to achieving it), for him, is a Kantian natural duty that is not contingent on any contractual or social arrangement.¹⁷

Rawls then posits two principles of justice as fairness: his first priority is each person's infeasible claim to equal basic liberties, which must be compatible with similar liberties for all. His second priority is social and economic equality, whereby any social or economic inequality is only to be tolerated if it is attached to offices and positions open to everyone, and if it benefits the least advantaged most.¹⁸

Criticism has centred around practicalities such as the question of whether a real society would prefer utilitarianism (subject to a guaranteed minimum) over Rawls's maximin principle,¹⁹ and around the theoretical question of whether Rawls's proposed method of the "veil of ignorance" may be untenable due to existing attachments being part of the identity of the negotiators.²⁰ Rawls

¹² Ibid.

¹³ J.Rawls, *A Theory Of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp.20-21.

¹⁴ J.Wolff, pp.17-29.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.19.

¹⁶ J.Rawls, p.viii.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp.114-115.

¹⁸ J.Wolff, pp.159-161.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.178.

²⁰ M.Sandel, *Liberalism And The Limits Of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1998), p.11.

himself revised his theory to respond to the latter discussion, but a number of points remain unaffected by this. Firstly, it goes without saying for Rawls that we are all of equal moral worth. Secondly, Rawls believes that we are capable of at least approximating a fair society. Thirdly, Rawls believes that constructing one is going to require skill and effort. Finally, Rawls's statement of priorities above demonstrates that although freedom is Rawls's most important social good that he wants to distribute equal measures of, he envisages at least some tensions inherent in its reconciliation with equality.

5. *The multiple truths of values in tension enhancing each other*

It has already become clear from the above that tensions exist between the three values. Freedom and individual autonomy collide whenever a suicidal person is rescued from a bridge. Individual autonomy and equality collide when we are tempted to jump the supermarket checkout queue.

In the contexts of political philosophy as well as of popular debate, it is the third intersection – complexities involved in reconciling freedom and equality – that has attracted particular attention: Rawls's above conception of freedom and equality as distinct priorities, between which trade-offs may be necessary, is but one example. A tax increase, removing some financial freedom from the wealthy to implement equality in education and healthcare, is not usually achieved without debate.

I would consider it naïve to pretend that these tensions do not exist. However, I also believe that any account of this relationship is incomplete without considering their opposite: there are opportunities as well as challenges inherent in the relationship between these values.

Rosenberg's account of Amartya Sen's work presents freedom and equality not as values in competition, but as mutually supportive pieces of a jigsaw that function as means and as ends simultaneously.²¹ Sen's own writing gives ample evidence of developing countries successfully synthesising these values while understanding development "as the expansion of human capability to lead more worthwhile and more free lives":²² an exercise which, he points out, requires a conception of human beings not only as means of production, but also as ends in themselves.²³

In this context, Sen discusses our desire to contribute to, as well as to be supported by, society: from his account of the psychological harm caused by unemployment despite the availability of income support,²⁴ to observations on our disposition, through sympathy or commitment, to transcend self-interest willingly,²⁵ Sen is clear that successful development cannot be achieved through welfare provision alone.

This perception is echoed by Frankl's observations while imprisoned in a concentration camp, and during his professional practice thereafter: Frankl puts forward a sense of having a purpose to fulfil, as opposed to exclusively having interests to pursue, as the most significant factor in preventing

²¹ A. Rosenberg, *Philosophy Of Social Science* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2016), pp.190-191.

²² A. Sen, *Development As Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.295-296.

²³ Ibid., p. 296.

²⁴ Ibid., p.94.

²⁵ Ibid., p.270.

suicide.²⁶

It is at this point that it becomes clear that individually as well as collectively, we stand to gain from following Sen in promoting conceptions of humanity and of development that transcend distributive justice, and allowing a capacity-building conception of freedom to enter a mutually supportive relationship with equality. Since we desire to give as well as to take, it is evident that building everyone's equal capacity to contribute is going to result in an increase in social and material resources, i.e. additional freedoms, becoming available.

This reflection is supported by recent research on minority involvement generating increased innovation.²⁷ Far from being an isolated occurrence, the phenomenon has been observed frequently enough to cause a steep increase in the amount of research on inclusive innovation²⁸ and, unsurprisingly, it is emerging that the effect is intensified whenever minority groups are structurally as well as operationally involved. Casting our net wider, and beyond economics, we find that Raymond Williams already drew attention to the same phenomenon in the arts decades previously.²⁹

This begs the question why we have not managed to enjoy the effect more consistently.

I believe the answer lies in Wittgenstein's riverbed analogy of social interaction, whereby we usually perpetuate an established, rule-governed way of doing things.³⁰ While scope for development does exist, erosion is usually slow: the nature of a Wittgensteinian riverbed is for its inhabitants to take its shape for granted, which means that established practice is going to incorporate some contributions less readily than others. A variety of mechanisms can be at play.

A refugee doctor left with a career as a taxi driver as their only option (instead of the win-win situation of a pathway to adopted-country qualification being explored) is an example of legislation in need of revision.³¹ In addition, Karl Marx, despite advocating extensive state control during the penultimate stage of his model, pointed out that flawed legislation is not the only cause of malfunction in society.³² UK legislation grants equality regardless of sexual orientation; our unthinking request that a gay colleague bring his "wife" to an event falls short, and is another case of a Wittgensteinian riverbed in need of erosion.

Raimond Gaita frames the question in terms of a wider conception of equality: for him, justice goes

²⁶ V. Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp.106-117.

²⁷ N. Lee, "Cultural Diversity, Innovation, And Entrepreneurship: Firm-Level Evidence From London", *Economic Geography* Vol.89 No.4, 2013. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/ecge.12016> [Accessed: 19 July 2019].

²⁸ R. Heeks et al., "Inclusive Innovation: Definition, Conceptualisation And Future Research Priorities", *Development Informatics Working Paper Series*, Paper No. 53 (Manchester: Centre for Development Informatics, University of Manchester, 2013). Available at: http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/gdi/publications/workingpapers/di/di_wp53.pdf [Accessed: 19 July 2019].

²⁹ R. Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1981), pp.83-85.

³⁰ O. Hanfling, *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 1989), p.162.

³¹ M. Nedelman, "Why Refugee Doctors Become Taxi Drivers", *CNN Health*, 9 August 2017. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/09/health/refugee-doctors-medical-training/index.html> [Accessed: 19 July 2019].

³² J. Wolff, p.182.

beyond fairness, so that “we must be open to the distinctive voice of others, and that in turn means that we must encourage the conditions in which those voices can form and be heard.”³³

In other words, the better we are able to transcend our riverbed and see those we initially perceive as “other” not only as potential service users needing equality in the provision of social and material goods, but also as people and contributors fully equal in their diversity, the better we are going to be able to benefit from equality’s potential to increase individual and collective freedom as well as, in the example of a tax increase above, occasionally requiring a sacrifice of it.

Had the above been based on a Communitarian conception of the values involved (e.g. Sandel’s), or on Williams’s or others’ Marxist ones, instead of a Rawlsian one, an increase in collective freedom alone would have been likely to tip the balance before innovation even came into play.

6. Conclusion

Individual autonomy, freedom, and equality are all concepts that have more than one definition.

Under the definitions adopted in this essay, based on a largely individual conception of an agent, the outcome is one of multiple truths: while debates over tax increases to promote equality exemplify potential difficulties in reconciling these values without loss, it is equally evident that they are, simultaneously, also capable of enhancing each other.

Especially Sen’s work, drawing on a conception of human interaction that goes beyond distributive justice, shows these values becoming mutually supportive from an individual as well as from a collective point of view: an idea that is supported by contemporary research on minority inclusion in innovation, as well as by Gaita’s and Frankl’s thoughts on our desire to contribute as well as to receive.

The challenge lies in educating ourselves to look beyond our Wittgensteinian riverbed.

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³³ R.Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.104.

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