

Editorial: Freedom and Power II

This is the second of two special issues on freedom and power to be published seriatim in *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*. The contributors to this issue analyse the relationship between freedom and power in fascinating ways. Issue 131 was arranged in terms of intellectual historical chronology, focusing on the work of Hobbes, Spinoza, Hegel, Adorno and Arendt, amongst others. This time the contributors are concerned less with intellectual history and more with conceptual, exegetic and contemporary matters.

The first pair of articles, Peter Morriss' 'What Is Freedom if It Is Not Power?' and Pamela Pansardi's 'Power and Freedom: Opposite or Equivalent Concepts?', speak directly to one another as they tackle critically a series of conceptual conundrums that are central to contemporary moral and political philosophy, especially as inspired by Matthew Kramer and Ian Carter's defences of a version of the 'negative', liberal account of freedom against the 'neo-roman' or 'republican' accounts of freedom resuscitated by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit.

The second pair of articles, Diego von Vacano's 'The Form of Freedom in Plato's *Laws*: An Interpretation' and Chris Allsobrook's 'Blackout: Freedom, without Power', use ancient and critical insights to question the received opinion, especially amongst liberal and republican thinkers, that formal freedom (or equal formal freedom) supports democracy (and other ideals) under a variety of economic and political conditions. For von Vacano the very idea of liberty is exclusive and dangerous; for Allsobrook, those that conceive of liberty as opposed to power and coercion de-politicise power and freedom, misconstruing them as entities that can be pre-determined prior to individual interaction.

In the first article, 'What Is Freedom if It Is Not Power?', Peter Morriss embarks on an understanding of the work that the concept of freedom does, by distinguishing it from the concept of power. When we are interested in our power, we are interested in what we are able (and not able) to do; and the same is true of freedom in a number of versions of how that concept is understood. So, although he is tempted by the idea that freedom does *not* matter in a way distinct from the way that power matters, the article proposes that it is plausible to think that when we are interested in freedom, we are interested in something else. The article is largely concerned with looking for this 'something else'. Along with liberals of a variety of stripes he suggests that freedom differs from power in focusing on the *constraints* that we are (or are not) under. However, he departs from the 'negative', liberal conception by arguing that when we are interested in freedom, the importance of these constraints is not partic-

ularly that they stop us doing things, because that is covered by considering our powers. He suggests, by contrast, that the constraints are important – if they are important at all – because some constraints insult our dignity. This intimates an alternative approach to the current focus on freedom as a property of *actions*: that of freedom as a property of *persons*. This idea is explored and defended. In a final section on republican freedom, he argues, against Pettit, that there is no distinctive *concept* of republican freedom (as distinct from the standard liberal understanding of freedom); but that there is a different – and a highly attractive – political theory present in republicanism: people suffer because they do not have the freedom to protect their interests: give them that freedom, and they can resist the tyrant, ‘freedom’ here being synonymous with power against the tyrant.

In the second piece in this special issue, ‘Power and Freedom: Opposite or Equivalent Concepts?’, Pamela Pansardi challenges the common assumption according to which power and freedom are considered mutually exclusive concepts. She argues, by contrast, that when power (interpreted as power over) and freedom are conceived as properties of different individuals involved in a social relation, they do not necessarily stand in an inversely proportional relation. Standing on the shoulders of Kramer, Carter, Morriss and Dowding she offers an assessment of the conceptual relations between ‘power’ and ‘freedom’. She argues that the two concepts are normally thought of as standing in a relation of mutual exclusion, and are often defined in reciprocal terms: while being free means not being subject to someone’s power, to have power is to constrain someone’s freedom. In opposition to this, she proposes a more detailed interpretation of their conceptual relations, distinguishing between two different cases. In the case in which power and freedom are understood as properties of two different individuals involved in a social relation, she argues that they are not necessarily in a relation of mutual exclusion: power can be exercised in ways which do not reduce, and which might even increase, the power-subject’s freedom. In the case, by contrast, in which they are understood as properties of the same individual, she claims that power and freedom show a significant degree of correspondence. Accordingly, she maintains, a normative theory of society which recognises equality in the distribution of power as a fundamental requirement for the realisation of democracy cannot be based on the value of the maximisation of individual freedom, but must instead be based on a recognition of the value of the equal distribution of freedom among the different individuals in a society.

In this issue’s third piece, ‘The Form of Freedom in Plato’s *Laws*: An Interpretation’, Diego von Vacano suggests that for Plato, the founding father of modern Western political philosophy, freedom is exclusive and dangerous: it is an elite phenomenon, rather than popular-democratic; liberty is fully available only to an exclusive few, not to the broad spectrum of a city’s members or citizens. Von Vacano argues that, while the concept of freedom is not treated systematically by Plato, the *Laws* contains an implicit conception of freedom,

particularly in Book III. The purpose of his article is to attempt a reconstruction of this implicit theory, which runs counter to the traditional view that freedom and democracy are cognates. He argues that there is a Form of Freedom in the *Laws*. It is comprised of two dimensions: an organic and a civic component. They are mediated by human agency.

However, freedom in its ideal form is only possible to a select intellectual elite that can grasp these two dimensions. This elite is composed of a few wise elder men who take up the task of lawmaking as a ludic or playful enterprise. He also argues that degeneration away from true freedom is possible when political elites mislead a community away from Plato's ideal, such as with Cyrus in Persia. Ultimately, Plato's idea of freedom tells us that liberty is only truly available to a select few, not to a broad citizenry. Thus, freedom and democracy are not tied intimately but are opposed to each other.

Finally, also with reference to Plato, but here more positively, and using the example of South Africa today, Christopher Allsobrook argues in 'Blackout: Freedom, without Power' that a formal conception of liberty, discretely abstracted from political conditions of freedom, obscures structural conditions of domination. His article attributes the conception of 'freedom-without-power' that dominates contemporary Western political philosophy to a reification of social agency that mystifies contexts of human capacities and achievements. Plato's analogy between the structure of the soul and the *polis*, he suggests, shows how freedom is a consequence, rather than a condition, of political relations, mediated by inter-subjective contestation. From this basis, he draws on the work of Raymond Geuss, to argue against pre-political ethical frameworks in political philosophy, in favour of a more contextually sensitive, self-critical approach to ethics. Such reciprocal ethical-political integration addresses problems of ideological complicity that may arise if freedom is abstracted from history and power in political philosophy. The piece ends by reconstructing a critical account of African identity from the writings of Steven Biko. This illuminates symptoms of what he calls 'meritocratic apartheid' in South Africa today, which, he submits, Thaddeus Metz's influential pre-political conception of *Ubuntu* obscures, by abstracting the figure of African personhood from politically significant historical conditions. In sum then he argues, via Plato, for the political character of freedom, and elaborates, via Geuss and Nietzsche, the normative significance of the political character of freedom, and thereby presents a critique of an account of African ethics that presumes a pre-political conception of humanity.

Here then we have two pairs of articles, both of which attempt to rescue the concept of freedom for meaningful use in social and political theory not by abstracting it from the concept of power but by taking seriously its relations with power. What is even more interesting is that they do so from widely different philosophical and political perspectives. The first pair do so from the mainstream liberal or 'negative' conception of freedom, while the second pair, if quite differently, do so from more radical and critical perspectives. And yet

there is the beginning of a consensus: the concept of freedom in social and political theory cannot do without the concept of power, at least if it is to be practicably useful and not simply artfully simple.

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ON BEHALF OF THE EDITORS