

Political theory and freedom of choices

Antonio L. Rappa*

Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore, Singapore

***Correspondence:**

Antonio L. Rappa,
rappa@suss.edu.sg

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Can there be genuine freedom of choice? This paper takes into account competing versions of freedoms and liberties from the Western tradition. There are competing accounts because of the variegated approaches to understanding freedom. There are also various advantages and disadvantages to these varieties of conceptual freedom. If it were possible to place these on a linear scale, there are choices that lie on the right-wing and, at the other extreme, on the left-wing. These propagandist notions of freedom pose serious consequences for the actual choices offered as well as the choices that are eventually made. The paper examines the key arguments made by the most important philosophers of democracy and freedom in modernity. The paper questions whether anyone ought to bother about freedom in the first place. The paper concludes with the major articulations of freedom from both normative and positive political theory.

Keywords: freedom and liberty, democracy, the Western tradition of political philosophy, Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment, John Rawls, authentic choice, inauthentic choice

Introduction

In the Western tradition¹, the problem of the “freedom of choice” has been treated in various conceptual arguments since at least the time of Aristotle. The Western tradition involves classical Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, and the ancient Roman poets, including Ovid and the other Olympian mythologists [(1):131]. In the Greek censorship, myth of Callisto is differentiated from Ovid’s, where voice is power, and since Callisto loses her voice, she hence loses her power. Diana exiles Callisto to preserve her own sexuality, and Juno transforms Callisto into a bear to secure her as Jupiter’s wife. But Jupiter thinks nothing of Callisto and merely uses her to release his lustful urges. Ovid’s own experiences resonate within the story of Philomela, who, having refused to be silenced even when her tongue was spliced, began writing instead.

This is why it is primarily through writing that ancient and modern philosophers of freedom express their choices. Concepts of the freedom of choice in modernity begin at the point of individual birth. One can only select choices from a restricted or imposed set of options as a child, an adult, or as a dying person. All these choices are limited by a wide range of variables. After a long bibliographic review of the literature on liberty, freedom, and choice, the paper argues that the problem of freedom begins at the time of birth. Is it our genuine choice to be born? Do we have a real choice to continue making choices? The choices that we have before us in life are not always real. Neither are they always genuine. They may not be real because we do not know the extent or meaning of the available options, nor do we know if better options will emerge later. The choices that we have before us also might not be genuine or authentic. And as a result of the lack of any forthcoming authenticity, the choices we make might result in unintended consequences. This is to say nothing about the impact of politics, religion, propaganda, subjectivity, science, or social expectations on inauthentic choices that have received different theoretical treatments since the time of Hegel and Kant to Heidegger and Sartre (2–6). Why should anyone bother with freedom

¹ Naturally, scholars such as Critchley and others have criticized the notion of a Western philosophical tradition by raising the question of a Black Socrates [(34): 79–98].

in the first place? It would seem that the weaponization of freedom and liberty is the desire and outcome of ancient, medieval, and modern warmongers. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the importance, or perhaps lack of, freedoms and liberties in our lives. Political scientists in general and political theorists in particular must strive to take into account the historical evolution of Western theories of freedom while not remaining shackled by the same theories. For us theorists, freedom is always on our minds, or at least on the backburner.

As important as this may be, freedom and liberty are not always at the forefront of every individual's minds.

Literature review

Although we begin our review of the literature on freedom and choice with Edmund Burke, we could have alternatively begun with the works of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Political theory does not have to be a series of arguments made from a sequence of chronologies often associated with the simplistic format used by historians.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was against the irrationality of the French Revolution as well as the guillotining of Marie Antoinette. He saw the French revolutionaries as extremely unreasonable. But Burke sought to limit the political power of the English monarchy but defended the throne of Louis XVI as he denounced the French revolution [(7):417]. He was devoted to the spirit of what he referred to as "rational liberty," a freedom that was designed to regulate itself. Burke loved freedom but fought to limit the political power of the State and Church. But he also believed in liberal constitutionalism—freedoms regulated and restricted by law. Burke supported "a manly, moral, regulated liberty." He recognized the power of "self-interest" but emphasized the importance of "self-restraint." Overall, Burke was a relatively strange liberal thinker. He embraced the Glorious Revolution (1688) and approved of the American Revolution (1776) and the Polish Reform (1791), yet he opposed the French Revolution (1790). Therefore, we can only conclude that Burke had both radical and revolutionary streaks (8–11).

Kantian freedom

Unlike the well-travelled Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant was quite a homebody. As one of the most important German Enlightenment era philosophers, Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg in 1724 and spent most of his life in Eastern Prussia. This is an odd situation for someone who devoted his life to continental Western philosophy. Yet he remains one of the giants of modern Western philosophy, nevertheless. Kant had different views of freedom, not just one. According

to Kant, "freedom is the freedom to act on subjectively contingent choices that reflect the divergent purposes of concrete individuals" [(12):560] or "*Willkür*" which refers to a one-sided arbitrary decision (moral or otherwise) that is in fact similar to Hegel's conception of *de Willkür*. For Kant, the autonomy of the will was the supreme basis of morality; the autonomy of the will was a necessary though not sufficient condition for moral agency. Indeed, for Kant, "the property of the will by which it is a law to itself independently of any property of the objects of volition" [(13):263]. This precept influenced Kant's belief in the democratic peace theory that he proposed.

Kantian scholars tend to agree that Kant's democratic peace proposition is a situation where democratic states are more amenable and cooperative with other democratic states than with non-democratic ones. Democratic states behave differently when they deal with non-democratic states. Some scholars have gone to the extent of arguing that the democratic peace proposition is nothing but a myth. Bruce Russett went to the other extreme, where he claimed that the world possesses a critical core of democratic states. However, the majority of Kantian scholars tend to agree with Kant's notion of cooperative behavior among democratic states. In other words, democratic states tend not to go to war with other democratic states. However, some scholars—while not outrightly rejecting Kant's peace theory—argue that the inherent weaknesses in democratic peace theory make it less useful than realism, which is superior to democratic peace theory as a predictor of international outcomes [(14):7].

But Kant's work is not just about democratic peace, and he does not claim to build a comprehensive theory of peacefulness. The utilitarians, who believe in redistributive theories of justice, treat the punishment of criminals as the means of achieving the happiness of the majority of citizens over the minority of citizens. Making more people happy is always the clarion call (albeit simplistic) of the utilitarians—such as James Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. The utilitarians and their supporters in the 20th century say that Kant is in fact a supporter of redistributive justice when it comes to the punishment of criminals. This means that if the majority of people prefer the death penalty by execution, it will be implemented. If there is a majority of one that prefers the death penalty to be execution after torture or execution by being shot to death with a gatling gun, then so it will be. And if the majority's happiness is achieved by banning all forms of capital punishment, then that is what will happen. For the redistributivists, the punishment must fit the crime.

While utilitarians draw from Kantian redistributivism or redistributive justice, other scholars draw from what is known as retributive justice [(15):319]. The latter is associated with the work of St. Thomas Aquinas' ideas on punishment, which must always contain a moral determination as well as a dereliction of the will. These two terms are inadequately covered by Koritansky. Therefore, under Catholic dogma, punishment must fit the willfully

committed moral crime of sin. Spiritual or otherwise, the notion of Kant's redistributivism, on the one hand, and Aquinas' moral punishment for the good, on the other hand, are two interesting streams of justice that cannot be simply ignored.

Kant's three critiques are often seen to be his greatest contributions to Western political philosophy, especially in ethical philosophy. These are the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790).

Kant wrote the *Critique of* toward the end of the Enlightenment era, which was already in a state of crisis as the philosophical paradigm began shifting toward Romanticism. On hindsight, we know that the Enlightenment was Western philosophy's response to 16th and 17th century modern science (Copernicus, Galileo, Newton) and the increasing faith in human reason that led to the criticism of the traditional authority of the State and the Church. "Why should we need political or religious authorities to tell us how to live or what to believe, if each of us has the capacity to figure these things out for ourselves?" asked Kant.

For Kant, freedom is derived from empirical observations and thus from some kind of agent or agencies [(16):537–549]. But this course of treatment of Kantian freedom appears to be more about making a mountain out of a molehill. Apart from the democratic peace theory, Kant was similarly famous for his notion of the categorical imperative. For example, if a murderer is looking for your friend who is hiding in your house and demands to know where your friend is, you have to tell him the truth, even if it might mean that your friend might be murdered. While you do not have the *mens rea* or the intention to kill your friend, telling the murderer where you friend is and knowing that she or he might be murdered makes you an accessory to the murder of your friend. Thus, Kant said, one must tell the truth to the point of death. This means that even if you are accused of being an accessory to a crime, and proven guilty of it, you must still tell the truth on pain of criminal punishment.

Critical theory

The Frankfurt School grew out of the Institute of Social Research and led to the establishment of critical theory, which compiled the works of several modern German philosophers. The beginnings of this school are seen to be around the time when the Weimer Republic was already in a political mess. The critical theorists are marked by their joint efforts that approach neo-Marxism from various angles. Critical theory is unique not because of its name or label but because it generally views the role of political theory as part of a larger focus. The focus of critical theory has usually revolved around the need to free humanity from capitalist slavery, as posited by the first generation of scholars.

Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970), Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993), and Eric Fromm (1900–1980) are considered members of the first generation of critical theorists. The second generation was made up of Jürgen Habermas and the less well-known Richard Bernstein.

The third generation is believed to have included the former students of Habermas, including his main assistant, Albrecht Wellmer, and others from the United States and Germany, including but not limited to Andrew Feenberg, Klaus Offe, Josef Früchtl, Hauke Brunkhorst, Klaus Günther, Axel Honneth, Alessandro Ferrara, Cristina Lafont, and Rainer Forst. However, the Frankfurt School has been scrutinized by various scholars, including Chantal Mouffe and Douglas Kellner, Martin Jay, Zoltan Tar, and Tom Bottomore. Mouffe argued that discursive action was a large part of reaching consensus, leaving little political space once cooperation was achieved; this was her basis for indirectly criticizing the work of several first-generation critical theorists whose simplistic conceptual basis for social inquiry was to increase the possibility of liberty by any means possible. Theodore Adorno's criticism of genuineness was a focus of Martin Jay's critique of "taking on the stigma of inauthenticity" [(17): 15]. Jay went on to cite Heidegger's *Being and Time* as Theodore Adorno's target in his critique of authenticity. Bottomore's brilliant study took a controversial view of the Frankfurt School and its general neglect of history (a case that was similarly raised by Michel Foucault at different fora) while attempting to establish links with 1960s positivism and structuralism. Unlike many political philosophers, the Frankfurt School remains alive and healthy but is not considered very influential any longer.

Heidegger and Arendt

Perhaps two theorists who lived around the time of the Frankfurters and are sometimes associated with the Frankfurters were Martin Heidegger and his student Hannah Arendt. While Karl Jaspers at first supervised Arendt, it was Heidegger who eventually made her his life's project. Heidegger was said to have taught Arendt everything she knew about technology and its evils. Heidegger recognizes two classes of "Being" or *Zuhandensein* (deliberative interpretation by appropriation of that which is ready-to-use) and *Vorhandensein* (discursive appropriation of the present-at-hand). Both classes are linked by the concept of "*-handensein*" [(18):387–408].

Arendt went on to attain worldwide acclaim with her brand of modern philosophy. She did not let her experiences of the past affect her own personal thinking. Arendt was attempting to write a comprehensive thesis about the psychology of the mind and the ways in which human beings act and react. But she died long before it could even see

fruition. One of her major weaknesses was her inability to groom successors among her many students (a stark comparison with writers such as Habermas, for example).

Unlike many other political theorists, such as Dorothy H. B. Kwek and Antonio L. Rappa; and Jane Bennett and William Connolly, Arendt and Heidegger's personal lives drew significantly more attention than their theoretical work and political interests.

Arendt's relationship to Heidegger was marred by the Hollywoodization of their 4-year long love affair, the one between a man who desired to become the state philosopher during Nazi Germany and the other being one of the most brilliant political theorists of late modernity who happened to be a beautiful Jewish woman as well. Referring to Arendt, Julia Kristeva wrote about the former's psychic bisexuality. Kristeva was merely being mean. This was due to her inability to incorporate Arendt's works into her own queerness. The reality was that Arendt's politics did transgress the boundaries of modern political theories' understanding of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in what came to be primarily antithetical diatribes to feminist theory as a whole. Heidegger, however, drew far less attention as he attempted to embrace and then escape Nazi influences. In spite of their ethnic difficulties, Arendt would remain his loyal apologist for over two decades. Unlike the Frankfurters, the works of Heidegger and Arendt have been overtaken by events that occurred in the 21st century, even as many of their former students and students' students have attempted to keep their theories alive.

Robert Dahl

He was one of the most influential political theorists of democracy and was once considered the father of Empirical Democratic Theory and Modern Political Analysis (19). Dahl was also Yale's Sterling Professor of Political Science.² Dahl believed in democratic constitutionalism. He argued that the Bill of Rights (the first 14 amendments to the United States Constitution) guarantees individual autonomy. This meant for him that one's personal life decisions were outside the jurisdiction of the government. However, the citizen was required to participate in the creation of the public good to help determine social, political, and economic outcomes. Dahl is perhaps most known for his seminal work on polyarchy (as opposed to monarchy) where there were several paths to political sovereignty. This was presented in a life-long series of works, including *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956), *Who Governs?* (1961), *Pluralist Democracy in the United States* (1967), and *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989). Dahl's efforts resulted in several generations of students propagating his political views.

John Rawls' theory of justice

A contemporary of Dahl's was the brilliant scholar, John Rawls. In the introduction to the 1979 edition of Plato's Republic, Alfred North Whitehead wrote that history (the Western tradition, the Socratic Method) is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato. Rawls (1971) was said to be the most important philosophers since Plato. In his brilliant treatise on *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls explains how a society of citizens who possess inalienable civil rights can survive modernity. Rawls' *Theory of Political Liberalism* explores how power can be used democratically and fairly within established democratic institutions. His *Law of Peoples* involves his liberal foreign policy of creating a permanently peaceful international order. Rawls was clearly influenced by the idealism of Plato's Republic, as well as Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and John Locke's *Letter on Toleration* (1689). He showed that the American-held value of rebelling against a rogue government was drawn from Locke's *Right to Revolution* (1689). For Rawls, political power is always about the sovereignty of the people as a unity or a collective democratic body. Here we see the slight influence of Aristotle rather than Plato. And it led to some criticism by anti-Rawlsian scholars who did not believe it was possible to begin with Platonic assumptions and end with Aristotelian conclusions.

Nevertheless, Rawls believed that in democratic states, the sovereignty of the people was based on the reasonable expectation of legitimate government. Legitimate government was indeed a challenge for most states within the democratic transition. This is what justifies the American political culture of reasonable and legitimate government, "Since justification is addressed to others, it proceeds from what is, or can be, held in common; and so, we begin from shared fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture in the hope of developing from them a political conception that can gain free and reasoned agreement in judgment (*PL*, 100–01)."

Rawls' seminal work on a *Theory of Justice* is premised on juridical approaches derived from jurisprudence and used to interpret the basic values and norms implicit in a given political culture. Without overtly simplifying Rawls' theory, one has to understand his two basic principles in his theory: The first principle argues that each citizen must have an equal claim to basic civil liberties and that these liberties must be available to all citizens. The second principle argues that while socio-economic inequalities are present in modern societies (as they have in the past); there remain two conditions that have to be satisfied: (1) all offices and positions in society must be open and exist under conditions of fairness of opportunity and (2) any laws made in a genuine, authentic democracy (and just society) must benefit or work toward benefiting the least-advantaged citizens. This is also known as the *difference principle*. Rawls says that "all parts of society must have about the same prospects

² Rappa was the student of Deane Neubauer in 1993/4 till 1996.

of culture and achievement for those similarly motivated and endowed" (JF, p. 44). It is here that we see how his theory evokes the importance of redistributive justice as the main key to unlocking justice as fairness in an authentic democratic political culture. His argument that any laws that are enacted must benefit the least well-off members of society has come under severe scrutiny by many scholars and those opposed to Rawls' philosophy. Part of the reason for their disaffection with the *difference principle* is that there is no clear distinction between what Rawls meant by the least-advantaged citizens and the least well-off members of society. Also, many Republican politicians were opposed to the *difference principle* because it appeared to be an affront to the history of the American democratic transition itself. Other economic elites believed that Rawls' redistributive theory would lead to massive reductions of wealth among the top 10% of American citizens. Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (1971), while representing a critical keystone text, was perhaps too elegant to be put into practice. Those interested in his work should also understand the meaning of equitable outcomes through justice as fairness, when one imagines a utopian society through a moral blindfold. As it stands, Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971) remains too impractical for large populations.

Conclusion

Post-modernity and the failure of political theory

Kant's works have been shown to be difficult to penetrate for most scholars of German philosophy; while Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971) was shown to have been too elegant and utopian to implement in late modernity. Both philosophers, however, did attempt to reveal how authentic freedom of choice might be attained.

This paper asked if there could be authentic freedom of choice. The review of the literature on freedom accounted for competing versions of freedoms and liberties from the Western tradition. There are various advantages and disadvantages to these varieties of conceptual freedom from the right to the left. The major articulations of freedom from both normative and positive political theory were explained in terms of their impact on the history of Western political thought and hence on the shape of modernity itself.

It is therefore not surprising that the advent of political theory has come and gone as increasing generations of students read the works of political theorists as intellectual and academic exercises. A large part of the reason for the lack of modern student interest in political theory as a subfield is that: (1) it has not delivered practical applications as seen in cultural anthropology, architecture, economics, psychology, and sociology; (2) there has never been much funding for theoretical research in normative political theory

because of the so-called lack of "deliverables," another bogus term invented by modern post-Weberian bureaucrats; (3) political theory as a discipline is exhausted and the mines have been virtually depleted of new value; and finally, (4) political theory has been significantly weakened by the destructive force of post-modern political criticism of the Grand Narratives associated with ancient, medieval, and modern political theorists discussed in this paper.

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