DISCUSSION NOTE: CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY VERSUS THE FREE SOCIETY

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Introduction

Some would have it that we can have a philosophy of freedom without, well, a philosophy. In other words, they find it rather pointless to dwell on various philosophical topics, such as free will versus determinism, the problem of knowledge, what is the nature of right conduct and so forth. Instead they wish to focus on so called practical issues, such as how much prosperity or science or satisfaction is produced in a relatively free versus planned society. As if these considerations didn't have some philosophical dimensions.

Without by any means implying that philosophical issues are exclusively central to a defense of a just system of human community life, it would be of some value to see what philosophy can—indeed, needs to—contribute to such a task. Let me take a brief look at some of the most important of these.

Knowledge of what is Right

Among classical liberals there is a sizable group that would eschew the belief that human beings are able to know what is right, how they ought to act and organize their communities. Value-skepticism, we may call it, is rife among these champions of liberty. Examples include many members of the Austrian School and Chicago Schools of economics who embrace what they call value subjectivism, the view that what is right for someone to do is really something that only the person involved can say, based on his or her

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preferences or desires. So knowing anything about how another person ought to act is impossible because that is entirely up to that person to say.

The fact that this view tends to backfire, despite being thought to be a bulwark against tyranny and authoritarianism, does not appear to disturb too many who embrace it. How does it backfire? Well, when classical liberals proclaim that the free society, as they understand it, is what we ought to promote and accept in our legal order, they are themselves saying something about values that supposedly apply to us all. Some, such as the late Milton Friedman, have bitten the bullet and accept that theirs is but a preference for freedom, not something they can justify for everyone. But others continue to make it appear that the free society is just and good for all human beings. But if values are subjective, how could this be defended?

Also, the late Roy Childs's point to von Mises seems still telling: if legal positivism is true, then why complain about government actions that redefine what you can do with property? Indeed, why should consumer satisfaction be the measure of efficiency? If there is no moral knowledge, then there is no basis for complaints other than ultimately one of influence and power.

So it is clearly a concern for those who champion the free society how this matter of our capacity to know what is right—not just for each of us subjectively, personally but for people as such—is resolved. That is especially so in the current era of globalization, wherein the ideals of liberty are promoted for all people around the globe, not only for special modern or "advanced" societies. After all, one of the grounds for rejecting globalization—that is, the extension of the principles of the free market to all corners of the world—is what is called cultural relativism. It's Ok to have free markets in, say, the USA or Western Europe but not in Cuba or Somalia. Indeed, this very point was being stressed at the conference on human rights in Vienna, held several years ago, by many heads of government from Asia and Africa. If one is to argue that this line is but a rationalization for maintaining oppressive regimes, one will have to show that the cultural relativist stance is misguided. And for that it is necessary to show that what is right for people to do, especially regarding the organization of their communities, can be known reasonably well.

I will not attempt to make this case here but I do wish to indicate where I would look for the solution, namely, in a theory of truth that does not require for us to have final or timeless knowledge in order to be able to lay claim to knowing something to be so and so. From this I would then proceed to show that what economists have called subjective are, in fact, individual or agent relative but also quite objective cases of knowledge. It's analogous to the value of, say, nutrition, medicine or clothing: While there are

some clear enough general principles in these areas, when it comes to applying them individual and type differences will matter, too. So while it is right to take pain killers when one hurts, how much and which kind one ought to take will be dependent on one's own physiology. Similarly, it is right for someone to raise his or her kids to prepare them for adulthood, the specifics of how to raise them will, however, vary depending on the details of one's circumstances which are objectively real yet not at all uniform.

Free Will Versus Determinism

Not unrelated to the former concern is this one about whether human beings have the capacity to make basic choices, to take the initiative in their lives, including their economic conduct. Just for starters, entrepreneurship is directly related to this issue: if we lack free will, we are not really taking any kind of initiative in our economic undertakings and the entrepreneur has done nothing different from one who lacks his or her skills and aptitudes.

More generally, one concern that brings in the free will issues is personal responsibility for how one conducts oneself. Another is whether those who invade someone's moral space or violate their rights, may be said to be doing what they ought not to do and perhaps ought to be stopped from doing it. Here a famous philosophical slogan, coined by Immanuel Kant, comes to mind, namely, "Ought implies can." It permeates our legal and moral thinking: if someone is deemed incapable of making a choice, holding him responsible is impossible. Thus, the insanity defense or the claim, in moral talk, that, "But I couldn't help it." And if a Hitler or Stalin or Fidel are simply compelled by impersonal forces to act as they do, then their conduct is just a lamentable event of reality, no different from a plague, hurricane, mad dog or rained out picnic.

Some have replied to this by claiming that in the context of political theory we need no discussion of this topic because we have all we need with the idea of initiated force. If what I do involves just myself, not someone else who physically compels me to do what I do, we then have personal responsibility a plenty and any talk of free will is superfluous. The freedom or liberty that's of interest to us is of this kind: not having people behave intrusively, we might put it, but clearing the way before all to carry on unimpeded.

Trouble is that imploring people to abstain from intruding on one another is entirely pointless unless they can have a say in how they conduct themselves, unless they are the one's who determine their conduct rather than its being produced by impersonal forces. Let's recall Kant's insight, again, reinforced by Rand with her observation that at the point of a gun

morality ends. What could be the meaning of "You should not invade the moral space of another," or "You ought to respect people's rights," or again, "You ought not to trespass," unless people have free will? That is, unless they have it in their power to determine what they will do rather than this being determined for them by forces over which they have no control.

Indeed, all the lamentations about the persistent and often increasing power-grabbing of governments, here or abroad, are entirely beside the point unless those in government (and those they claim to represent) can make choices as to how they will conduct themselves. In other words, these will reduce to nothing more than, well, outcries of dismay, as would be damning the skies because it's raining or a virus for invading one's body. Yes, these matters are often devastating but they are not anyone's fault that could have been avoided. From slavery to kidnapping, from rape to robbery, it would all be just bad things happening, no different from—well, the point need not be repeated.

But there is more. The issue of personal responsibility is no less important when it comes to assessing the merits of the free society. If indeed all of what we do is beyond our control, if we are powerless to do much about our lot, then imploring the poor or disadvantaged or inept or lazy to get going with self-improvement rather than promote measures that rob Peter to help Paul are also pointless. And, perhaps more importantly, any resistance to wealth—or other advantage—redistribution could be rejected on grounds that those with more are unfairly benefited. They not only sometimes but on no account could have had anything to do with their better lot. It is not only that sometimes luck favors people but that all benefits are a matter of luck, while all harms a matter of misfortune. Nobody ever deserves his or her faring better in life than do others. We are all in the same boat, so why are some at an advantage? The only public policy that would seem to be just in the light of this situation is some kind of effort to even things out. If merit is out of the question, so is being better off, if we can do something about it.

Sure, it is paradoxical to claim as does John Rawls, that we deserve none of our advantages because our very character is just a matter of forces outside of our control, so we should, therefore, proceed to even things out. After all, if nothing is under our control, neither is whether anything gets evened out or not.

Still, the first part of that story does suggest that something is amiss. People who believe we are all equally helpless can then easily make the move, well we must, therefore, do the right thing and divvy up the wealth equally

among all. No one deserves to be better off! Not that this follows logically but it does have emotional appeal!

There is also a good deal of talk among classical liberals about voluntary and free actions and institutions—trade, commerce, consensual sex, drug abuse or churches, clubs, corporations, and so forth, respectively. Yet, do we even know what "voluntary" and "free" mean unless we have some way to define these terms and distinguish them from what is meant by their supposed opposites, such as "coerced," "compelled," and "regimented." Moreover, none of these terms are value free, suggesting, as they seem clearly to do, that something untoward is going on when the latter situations obtain.

Or, again, why isn't the gunman's offer, "Your money or you your life?" simply acknowledging a choice someone has, instead of something insidious, called a deadly threat which ought not to be made? Further, the concept of "intervention" seems to be normative.

So the free will versus determinism issue does have bearing on whether and how we might defend the free society. If it's all a matter of *que serra, serra*, there is nothing to complain about.

Individualism Versus Communitarianism

Are human beings, as many classical liberals hold, essentially individuals, unique and irreplaceable, or are they, akin to say bees in a hive or members of a choir, interchangeable? Is it as Karl Marx believed, namely, that "The human essence is the true collectivity of man"? Or is it rather as classical liberals, Objectivists and libertarians hold, namely, that human beings are in their very nature to be understood by reference to *who* not just *what* they are? Is it the case, in other words, that *what* they are is largely a matter of *who* they are?

Back in the early 70s, in my first book, *The Pseudo-Science of B. F. Skinner* (Arlington House, 1974), it was to me striking that the famous Harvard behaviorist psychologist would identify the individual human being as no more than a theoretical point that is, in fact, no individual being at all, just an arbitrary point-event in an endless string of events from time immemorial to eternity.

Just how successful my attempt was to refute this might be assessed by reference to the fact that Professor Daniel Dennett, the president of the American Philosophical Association in 2001, gave a presidential address in which he contended that none of us exist as individuals and that, as a result, none of us can claim authorship to anything at all. Even his own talk could

not be construed as being his own doing—it's, as Skinner had argued, but an arbitrary point in a river of events proceeding through time.

Here, too, classical liberals have, I am convinced, a philosophical topic to address. Is individuality vital to our humanity or is it, like Marxists, neo-Marxists and many communitarians claim, an invention that serves the class interests of the bourgeoisie? Are we, rather, specie-beings whose very identity is a matter of "belonging" to communities, as Charles Taylor argues in his famous critique of classical liberal social thought, "Atomism"?

What if anything hinges on this? To start with, however much the free market may facilitate prosperity, knowledge, the arts or whatever, if somehow it is suited to a being other than ourselves, by accommodating our non-existent individuality—through its capacity to accommodate enormously diverse groups of individuals, with all their variety of needs and wants—it can be criticized for being bad for us. Even such famous arguments as that offered by von Mises and his students, namely, that there is a calculation problem with planned and even regulated economies, and the somewhat related one that such systems fall pray to the tragedy of the commons, rely on the truth of individualism. Who cares, as Professor Mishan has noted, that some arbitrary set of preferences by diverse individuals isn't being satisfied by central planners if what they aim for is, in fact, the uniformitization of human community life (illustrated so nicely by the Communist Chinese mass rallies in which all the people wear blue pajamas)? As Mishan notes,

> the Mises-Hayek critique would be more compelling ... if the declared aim of [e.g.] a Communist regime were that of simulating the free market in order to produce much the same *assortment* of goods. We should bear in mind, however, that the economic objectives of a Communist government include that of deliberately reducing the amounts of consumer goods which would have been produced in a market economy so as to release resources for a more rapid build-up of basic industries. [My emphasis]

The Mishan critique rests on the recognition that what matters to von Mises & Co., albeit inexplicitly, is that markets serve up a great diversity of assorted goods to suite the varied needs and interests of human individuals. Socialists and communist regimes, however, do not recognize human individuality as central to human life. Their version of a productive economy is to serve human beings qua members of what Marx called in his posthumously published book, *Grundrisse*, "an organic whole (or body)."

Last Reflections

As we see, several famous philosophical issues, in the last case the exact nature of human beings, emerge to confront the champion of the free society. And there are others—some of the perhaps with a theological dimension, such as whether human beings possess original sin, what is the precise nature of human evil and what can community life do about it, is evil to be dealt with politically, and so forth—but for now my aim has been to suggest that there really is something that philosophy as such can contribute to the struggle for the free society. I am a pluralist, one who holds that there are many disciplines needed to get at the broadest, widest accessible and possible understanding of human life. Economics, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, psychology, sociology or any other single field isn't going to do it for us. This, indeed, is just another aspect of the division of labor resting, in this instance, not only considerations of efficiency but on those of the nature of reality itself, metaphysics and ontology.

Contrary to what some friends of liberty hold, there is no one Archimedean point from which we can begin and gain a full understanding of the world, including human affairs. The more we encourage within our scholarly community a diversified approach, the better the chance of getting it right and explaining it to those whose support we need to advance the cause of *bone fide* human liberation.

Let me add a point in conclusion here about something many people not only outside but also within the discipline of philosophy find annoying about the field. This is that there seems to be no progress made in it, that all the topics keep reoccurring, in every era or generation. So, the critics ask, "What's the use of this kind of inquiry anyway? It's making no advances at all in how we understand the world."

Yet philosophy is probably just the sort of inquiry in which progress isn't the goal, but basic understanding, something each generation of human beings would need to gain for itself, not simply inherit from the past. In this regard human beings are akin to adolescents: they want to do it on their own, at least when it comes to answering the most basic questions.

This does not mean there are no good or even best answers to the questions being asked, only that once we get a hold of them we cannot expect things to just settle down, with no more work facing us. Yesterday's perfectly good answers will need to be rediscovered by the new crop of inquiring minds!

Thus philosophy may seem to be spinning its wheels but is in fact often embarking on its proper task, which is to get a justified, sensible, rational

understanding of the world for each new generation of inquirers. This suggests, rather strongly, that those who have confidence in the comparative merits of the free society, will always have some philosophical work awaiting them, in every generation. That, in part, is the meaning of the famous slogan, coined initially by Wendell Phillips, namely, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

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