

PHILIP PETTIT: A THEORY OF FREEDOM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

Philip Pettit in “A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency” (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001) tries to go back to the conceptual connexion between free will and political liberty in order to develop a single, unified theory of freedom in general. He constructs a theory that bears at once on issues of free will and political liberty, and on the connections between the two. He builds a theory to construe free will in such a way that it supports a defensible line on political liberty and a theory that interprets political liberty which is in accord with free will. His theory is governed in each of its parts by the implications of that part across all the areas, psychological and political in which the language of freedom is used in the hope that it will reflect holistic methodology. While he concedes there are perhaps plausible alternatives available as it often happens in philosophy, he finds it harder to see how the sort of unified theory presented by him can be varied without significant loss than it is to see how to vary any of the familiar, compartmentalized positions that are defended in respect of free will and political liberty.

The language he uses in his book does not represent a distinction between psychological and political matters in such terms. He speaks of freedom in the agent, rather than of free will in order not to represent it as a psychological power of self-determination. Not as political liberty, but as an autonomous domain of theory.

Freedom in the agent, covers, first, the freedom of the action performed by an agent on any occasion, second, the freedom of the self implicit in the agent's ability, to identify with the things thereby done and not just viewing them as a bystander, and third, the freedom of the concerned person in enjoying a social status that makes the action truly his or her's and not performed under pressure from others. Conceived in this way freedom in the agent has a social as well as a psychological aspect and the discussion inevitably runs the realm of free will and into politically relevant matters.

To be free, he contends is to be fully fit to be held responsible; it is to be fully deserving of the sort of reactions, that characterize human relations. The free action, the free self and the free person are nothing more or less than the sorts of action, self and person that are compatible with such fitness and are responsibility-compatible.

He defends freedom – specifically, the theory of freedom in the individual agent which associates it with discursive control.

Since the theory of freedom as discursive control involves a view of the free person it intrinsically embodies a social and political aspect to it. Moreover it contends that collective agencies, not just individual subjects, can also have freedom as discursive control. He maintains that one such collective agency, the state, should be given partial responsibility for promoting people's freedom as discursive control by the republican idea of non-domination. He realizes the danger that any powerful state will represent for people's enjoyment of non-domination, and ultimately of discursive control and sees the remedy lying in democratization, where this is represented as involving two dimensions, electoral and contestatory.

The result is a treatment of freedom under which there is one single theme involved in all freedom talk – that of fitness for responsibility; there is one general theory of what constitutes such fitness in agents – discursive control; and this theory provides a viewpoint from which one can see how issues of freedom go in the context of collectivization, politicization and democratization.

Thus, what Zarathushtra taught us at the dawn of history about Free Will can still be useful as well as appropriate today for people's enjoyment of democracy and non-domination and freedom as discursive control.