

## Dissertation Abstract – Joshua Kissel

### **Realizing Social Freedom: Exit, Democracy, and an Egalitarian Ethos**

This dissertation addresses two distinct but related questions. First, how should we conceive of *social freedom*? Second, given this conception, what *ideals* would best satisfy the demands we are under as citizens and moral agents? In answer to the first question, I defend a novel account of *social freedom*. **It is a conception of freedom as independence that understands freedom as the robust absence of socially remediable constraints.** On this view, one is free to the extent that one is not subject to a constraint or inability that could be alleviated by another agent. In answer to the second, I defend a set of three social ideals as the best means of realizing freedom: (i) robust freedom of exit, (ii) democracy in collective institutions, and (iii) egalitarian informal norms. My view provides two key insights for contemporary political theory. First, *contra* many right-libertarians and liberals, the value of freedom is enough to legitimate a robustly egalitarian political program. Second, *contra* republicans and other institutionalists, informal norms can effectively facilitate our realizing freedom.

### **Republicanism, Liberalism, and Social Freedom – Chapter 1**

An imprisoned person, an enslaved person, and a starving person in a world with excess food all have something important in common: each is constrained. The prisoner is constrained from leaving their cell, the slave from escaping servitude or directing their own activities, and the hungry from accessing the food they need. However, this is not all they have in common. Unlike—say—the inability of a child to fly like a bird, these constraints stand in need of moral justification. It is not enough to merely *explain* the way in which the laws governing imprisonment, servitude, or property generate these constraints—the demand is to *justify* our social institutions or norms.

The problem is that the two most popular conceptions of social freedom, liberal and republican, struggle to understand at least one of these paradigmatic cases of unfreedom—imprisonment or slavery—as an unfreedom at all. The republican makes the mistake of adopting a ‘moralized’ conception such that an individual counts as unfree only if they are constrained unjustifiably. In so doing republicans obscure the harm of unfreedom even when such unfreedom is ultimately justifiable—thus undermining our theory’s ability produce right action. On the other hand liberals struggle to recognize an enslaved person with an absentee or ‘benevolent’ master as unfree because liberal conceptions focus too much on present interference or constraint leaving them unable to register the fact that making decisions in light of the powers others have over us is itself the sort of constraint that calls for moral justification because these powers often limit what

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actions we even consider taking.

Hence, the necessity of my alternative understanding of freedom as the robust absence of socially remediable constraints. My account is justified by appeal to two claims; first, by picking out cases of unfreedom that call for justification this account fulfils the *functional-role* of a normatively salient concept. Secondly it is *actionable* because of its capacity to guide agents and institutions in their realization of freedom.

### Realizing Social Freedom – Three Social Ideals

On a robust and non-moralized conception of freedom there is no single ideally or perfectly free society. Nevertheless, in identifying those constraints that call for justification my account offers guidance in determining social ideals that can work in tandem to facilitate the widespread realization of freedom without depending on any politically illiberal answer to justificatory demands. I defend three such ideals: exit, democratic voice, and an egalitarian ethos.

#### *Exit and Democracy – Chapters 2 and 3*

Exit and policies like open borders or universal basic income secure our freedom by ensuring we can leave those situations we reject. Democracy—whether in the form of a vote in one’s polity or union representation in one’s place of work—secures freedom by limiting the constraints we are under when taking part in the institutions that are central to the functioning of our collective world.

#### *Egalitarian Informal Norms – Chapters 4 and 5*

This project departs most from existing political theory in its support of informal norms as a means of realizing freedom. The tension is that while exit and democracy are readily institutionalizable through different sets of laws, contracts, and other structural arrangements, an egalitarian ethos only functionally mirrors formalized norms. Nevertheless, I show that, when widely enough endorsed, egalitarian norms can secure widespread freedom in the same way as the formal law in a way that should satisfy my republican (and Kantian) critics. This argument comes in two parts. In chapter 4 I demonstrate that informal norms can resolve the problems we face in the state of nature in way analogous to that of the formal norms such as the law. They can do this despite their informal—specifically non-mediated and non-hierarchical—structure. I supplement this argument in chapter 5 where I defend an egalitarian ethos as a particularly effective informal norm for realizing freedom by exploring the egalitarian and informal structure we sometimes experience in our families, friendships, or amongst lovers. Furthermore, I offer an argument that identifies the value of such informal norms *even when* we live in non-ideal circumstances characteristic of

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increasingly authoritarian or unresponsive institutions.

### **Knowledge and Action / Theory and Praxis**

It is a good thing whenever we better understand a concept—especially one as central to normative philosophy as social freedom. However, more significant for me is the recognition that effectively realizing widespread freedom depends on understanding this concept in the right way precisely because such an understanding allows us to identify the sorts of social ideals that can guide our actions and the policies of the institutions of which we are all part.