

## Self-Directedness and the Human Good

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*Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics*

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The aim of *Norms of Liberty* is to establish the true ethical foundations of the liberal political/legal order. The authors see the need for a principled defense of liberalism and clarity about its fundamental principles as liberalism today finds itself in a state of profound practical crisis and theoretical confusion. The liberal regime is not understood to possess moral and political legitimacy by its contemporary opponents and is neither honored nor even esteemed by its contemporary lukewarm defenders. Post-liberal “communitarian” and contemporary natural-law critics of liberalism, for example, speak of the degrading and even immoral character of liberalism, claiming that the liberal regime “subverts moral life” and fosters “injustice and inhumanity” (Rasmussen and Den Uyl 2005, 11). According to these same critics, liberalism is theoretically indefensible because it is based on “false,” “illegitimate,” and “pernicious” principles of the Enlightenment. The principles of liberalism destroy human community and its doctrine of the “autonomous rights-bearing” individual leads to moral “subjectivism, and skepticism” (7). Liberalism implies moral subjectivism because the individual is posited as the “sole determinant of value” and it invites moral skepticism because knowledge of the human good is said to be unavailable to man as man (7).

The authors demonstrate that the crisis of liberalism can be traced

to its roots. Classical liberalism is vulnerable to the charge of moral subjectivism and skepticism because it self-consciously identifies claims made about the human good with personal preferences or tastes. The inquiries of the “Philosophers” concerning the “*Summum bonum*,” declares John Locke, were vain and useless. They might have as “reasonably disputed whether the best Relish were to be found in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts” (*Essay*, II.21.55). Skepticism concerning the possibility of knowledge of the human good, however, underlies the “fundamental tenets” of liberalism. Liberalism holds that “political power is not due anyone by natural right,” that the “people ought to have the freedom or liberty to pursue their own conception of the good life,” and that the purpose of the “political/legal order should be limited to protecting individuals in their pursuit of their own conception of the good life” (Rasmussen and Den Uyl 2005, 11). It is, however, precisely because the human good is not and cannot be a matter of knowledge that “values are reduced to preferences and substantive moral commitments are trivialized” (12). More fundamentally, liberalism’s skepticism about the human good undermines its moral legitimacy. By remaining “neutral to rival conceptions of the good and right” liberalism has no basis from which to claim that its own values are best (12).

The practical and theoretical crisis of liberalism is further aggravated by contemporary liberals’ understanding of liberalism as a complete moral doctrine or ethics rather than as a political solution to a fundamental political and human problem (93). This contemporary liberal ethics reduces morality to obligations of “toleration or cooperation” and to a very “narrow, instrumental, and minimalistic understanding of values and ethical life” (12). Contemporary liberals’ defenses of the moral goodness of liberalism simply invite the contemptuous attacks of the communitarian and natural-law critics of liberalism. “Moral minimalism,” however, also has its roots in the classical liberal tradition. The authors point to Hobbes’ reduction of moral virtue to the virtues of justice and charity (28–29). Hobbes’ moral philosophy lays the foundation for the liberal “socialization of ethics” (28).

Liberalism’s minimalistic conception of values and socialization of ethics is questioned today by liberalism’s communitarian and natural-law critics on the basis of a “neo-Aristotelian” ethics of moral

virtue. According to these critics, liberalism implicitly or even explicitly denies claims central to an ethics of human virtue. Liberalism, for example, denies that human beings are by nature social. It denies the non-instrumental nature and, hence, ethical value of practical reason or prudence. Its rights-centered and legalistic conception of human obligation renders it blind to the moral significance of the particular and contingent in the determination of moral conduct. And its skepticism concerning knowledge of human happiness fractures the ontological bond that exists between human liberty and the human good (9).

The authors of *Norms of Liberty* emphatically agree with all of these neo-Aristotelian criticisms of liberalism. Their powerful strategy of demonstration attempts to prove that the ethical commitments of the communitarian and natural-law critics of liberalism are not only compatible with but, in fact, presuppose the existence of the liberal political/legal order. The neo-Aristotelian claims defended by the communitarian and natural-law critics of liberalism require accepting “liberalism’s basic tenet,” which affirms that achieving and maintaining liberty is the central and primary concern of the political/legal order (9, 225). The lived reality of these neo-Aristotelian moral propositions presupposes the existence of the political order dedicated to liberalism’s most basic teaching because the exercise of moral virtue presupposes the possibility of moral agency. The possibility of moral agency, in turn, presupposes the existence of the political liberty uniquely maintained by the liberal political/legal order.

The authors’ own defense of liberalism, however, leads their argument into a “structural paradox” (12). Liberalism must import its theoretical and practical foundations from the non-liberal pre-modern philosophical tradition. The reason for this paradoxical necessity is that liberalism does not consistently maintain one of its own defining principles, i.e., the distinction between the political and the non-political (58). Liberalism violates this liberal principle by understanding itself to be an “equinormative” or “complete” moral philosophy (34, 93). To be a defensible political philosophy, however, liberalism must relinquish “all pretenses to being an ethics” at all (27). Liberalism’s tendency to universalize and legalize moral norms has had the effect of undermining the “moral propriety of the individualism” that liberalism claims to “cherish and foster” (27).

The authors' defense of the moral propriety of individualism makes full use of the liberal distinction between the political and the non-political. Liberalism can be defended if it respects the "division of ethics" into a "language of liberty for the political order" and a language of "personal morality" for the non-political order. This distinction corresponds to the authors' distinction between "norms" and "metanorms." Metanorms are moral principles that do not directly guide or determine moral conduct; rather, their purpose is to establish the appropriate context within which moral conduct may take place (34). The authors identify metanorms with rights, specifically the right to liberty.

Liberalism properly understood rejects the management of moral conduct as a legitimate function of politics. The purpose of politics is not to define moral conduct but to protect the possibility of the self-directed activity of each and every member of the political community. Contemporary critics and defenders of liberalism share a common assumption that politics ought to be a "vehicle for promoting and securing the moral" (16). Both fail to grasp the "essential uniqueness" of liberalism, i.e., its intentional "divestment of substantive morality from politics" (17, 324). Once the distinction between norms and metanorms is accepted, then and only then, can the "value of liberty" be understood to be "directly proportional" to the moral substantiveness of ethics (17). The defect of traditional and contemporary liberal moral theory consists in its identification of rights-respecting conduct with the "whole of morality" (47). This feature of liberalism leads inevitably to the "dilemma of liberalism," i.e., its own tendency to "either impoverish morality or trivialize rights" (47).

The solution to the problem of the self-defeating foundations and dilemma of liberalism is the neo-Aristotelian conception of human virtue and its relation to the human good. This conception proves to be a synthesis of the teleological eudaimonism of Aristotle and the moral individualism of Ayn Rand. The authors ground the right to liberty not in the prior right to self-preservation as in Hobbes but in a conception of human flourishing or self-perfection (95). Human flourishing, in turn, is grounded in a teleological understanding of human nature (124).

The authors' novel understanding of the human good is the basis

of their claim that liberalism is the “best regime.” The human good, according to the authors, is something real or “objective” and, at the same time, something highly individualized, chosen, and “agent-relative” (93). The human good is the actualization and manifestation of the human potentialities and capacities along with the basic or generic goods and virtues of human nature. The good life is the “self-sufficient life,” i.e., a life whose management and direction is under the control of the individual (147). The self-sufficient individual, however, is not a god living beyond need and community but a human being exercising self-directed activity in a social context (142, 167). Such a life presupposes not only the acquisition of all of the moral and intellectual virtues but their actual exercise guided by practical wisdom in the contingent and particular affairs of daily life. The good for man is not merely a personal preference or taste but the very perfection of the nature of each individual human being (152).

The perfection of human nature is not the perfection of an “abstraction” but the perfection of real human beings. The human capacities, goods, and excellences that “constitute human flourishing only become real, determinate, and valuable when they are given particular form by the choices” of individuals (80). The choices of individuals, however, do not take place in a moral vacuum. Each individual always already exists within a particular “nexus,” or highly individualized set of circumstances, talents, endowments, interest, beliefs, and histories that determine the “appropriate valuation or weighting” of the capacities, goods, and virtues for that individual (80, 150). The human good is real only insofar as it is “individually realized” (80, 137). It would seem to follow from this account of the human good that “there are many forms of human flourishing, but there is no *single* best form of human flourishing” (81). There is, then, no one *summum bonum* but “many *summa bona*” (81, 190). For this reason, the ethics of human flourishing is a form of “moral pluralism” (81, 134).

The human good, precisely because it is something *objective* and *chosen*, must be understood to be something *inclusive*, for the human *telos* comprehends without reducing to mere means all of the other human ends, pursuits, virtues, and goods. It must be *individualized* because it is brought into being by the deliberative choices and actions of individuals, *agent-relative* because the unique form of flourishing of

each individual is the real good for that individual, *self-directed* because the human good becomes determinate and real only insofar as it is chosen and sought, and *social* because the individual's pursuit of flourishing is, in part, conditioned and made possible by their own particular "nexus" (127–43). This understanding of the human good is the basis of "liberalism's problem" or the "central problem of political philosophy" (2). The problem uniquely solved by liberalism consists in finding a "political/legal order that will in principle not require that the human flourishing of any person or group be given structural preference over others" (78, 93). The political/legal order must remain absolutely neutral to all of the various forms of human flourishing because no single form of flourishing is best for all (147). Hence, the primary purpose of the political/legal order is to protect the possibility of all forms of human flourishing.

In order to guarantee that the political/legal order upholds the equal dignity of all forms of human flourishing, it must be governed by an ethical principle possessing the following characteristics. The principle must be consistent with *moral pluralism* or the "moral propriety of individualism," *universal* or "applicable to all forms of flourishing," *immanent* or "present in any and every form" of human flourishing, *rationaly compelling* or embodying "an agent-relative reason" for each and every individual to adopt the principle, an embodiment of *equality* or the equal dignity of each and every form of flourishing, and be a *possible* norm that all human beings "can in principle fulfill" (272). The ethical principle that meets these conditions is a "metanormative" ethical principle. The metanormative ethical principle that supplies the solution to liberalism's problem must, therefore, be consistent with the individualized, agent-relative, self-directed, and social character of human flourishing (93). This principle proves to be the "individual right to liberty" (93–94).

The political/legal order whose central and primary concern is achieving and maintaining liberty secures political and legal protection to a plurality of different forms of human flourishing without at the same time giving any single form of human flourishing "structural preference over others" (78). The moral legitimacy of the right to liberty, however, ultimately depends on the nature of human flourishing itself (86, 90). The possibility of participating in the human good presupposes the possibility of moral agency or self-direction and self-

direction is the very essence of liberty (90). All persons as moral agents must enjoy the moral autonomy to use their practical reasoning to discover the manner in which the basic human goods and virtues can be “coherently integrated and particularized in their lives” (80). It is only “through an individual’s practical choices” that the goods and virtues of human nature become “determinate, real, and valuable” (80, 84). The right to liberty, furthermore, protects the possibility for individuals to make practical choices in a social context (93). It permits each person a sphere of freedom—a “moral space” or “territory”—whereby “self-directed activities can be exercised without being invaded by others” (90). Hence, the right to liberty supplies an ontological basis for the possibility of the moral individualism constitutive of diverse forms of human flourishing.

The moral justification of the right to liberty is grounded in the fact that liberty is indispensable for the life of moral virtue and hence for the actualization and manifestation of man’s natural end. Human flourishing can come into being only through the free agency of each and every individual. All individuals must be free to legislate for themselves those norms that bring into being and constitute their own highly individualized form of flourishing because self-direction is the “central necessary constituent” of human flourishing (87, 139).

Self-direction refers to the “agency of an individual human being that is necessary for the operation of reason” (300). The operation and exercise of practical reasoning is central to all forms of human flourishing because “effort is needed to discover the goods and virtues of human flourishing as well as to achieve and implement them” (140). The goods and virtues of human flourishing must be made “one’s own” through the deliberative choices and efforts of each. Self-direction is indispensable for this activity because the exercise of reason is an exercise of self-direction and an act of self-direction is an exercise of reason (87). Reason and self-direction are “distinct aspects of the same conscious act.” Together they constitute what Rand called “volitional consciousness” (87).

Self-direction, however, to be exercised in an excellent manner, must be an act of practical wisdom or prudence. Practical wisdom is the virtue that “achieves, integrates, and unifies all the other ends that constitute human flourishing” (275). Practical reasoning, properly engaged, is “the intelligent management of one’s life so that all the

necessary goods and virtues are coherently achieved, maintained, and enjoyed in a manner that is appropriate for the individual human being” (147). Human beings, in order to live well, need both theoretical insight into the goods and virtues of human flourishing and practical insight into what is to be done at the “time of action” (149).

The human *telos* consists in the actualization of human potentialities and capacities whose specific form is “individualized by each person’s own attributes, circumstances, and interests” (150). The individual must incorporate the goods and virtues of human flourishing into his or her own “nexus by an act of reason or insight,” and this is necessarily a self-directed activity (151). In fact, “constitutive goods and virtues of human flourishing are valueless apart from the virtue of practical wisdom” (151). The human goods and virtues become valuable only in “relation to and because of the efforts of individual human beings” (152). Hence, practical wisdom is the “central intellectual virtue for ethics” (149).

The human good is grounded in human nature and in human freedom. Every human being has an “inherent potentiality” for his or her own “mature state.” The mature state of an individual is the “natural end” and “moral purpose” of that individual. The natural end or form of flourishing proper to each individual is not itself “a matter of choice,” however, but “a matter of human nature.” In fact, human nature has “directive power for our choices” (125). What is not a matter of choice, however, only becomes real, determinate and actualized “through choice” (126). Human beings are neither radically free nor radically necessitated (62, 166). The activities that human beings “ought to pursue” are given by their nature but are nevertheless neither good nor real apart from “individuals and their choices” (152). The reality and goodness of the individual’s mature state presupposes the individual’s self-directed exercise of his or her own practical wisdom. Human flourishing is both a self-directed activity and an expression of human nature.

*Norms of Liberty* is a defense of individualistic perfectionism. Its argument seeks to establish a “perfectionist basis for non-perfectionist politics” (15). Individualistic perfectionism understands “human flourishing” as necessarily involving self-directed choice. The argument of *Norms of Liberty*, however, tends to abstract from the

conditions of the possibility of human choice. Human choice becomes possible, according to Aristotle, by the presence of a disposition or condition of soul. An excellent psychic disposition comes to be present on account of actions done in conformity with the actions performed by one in possession of the excellent psychic condition. Human choice presupposes moral habituation, which, in turn, presupposes education into what is by nature noble and base. Aristotle endorses an opinion of Plato's according to which it is necessary for the young to be educated to "take delight and feel pain in the things in which one ought" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b12). Moral education reveals a difference between actions that merely conform to virtue and actions that are inseparable from a virtuous psychic condition. A virtuous psychic condition disposes the agent to feel pain in the presence of the ugly or shameful feelings and actions and to take pleasure and delight in the noble feelings and actions. The virtuous psychic condition capacitates and "inclines" the agent to pursue and choose what is noble and to avoid and reject what is shameful. If the agent were to choose the noble action on account of a prior rejection of a base action conceived as a real or possible alternative, i.e., as something possibly good, then the agent, according to Aristotle, would belong not to the class of the virtuous, but to the class of the self-restrained. For this reason, the virtuous agent's choice qua virtuous cannot be properly understood as an act of will or of "volitional consciousness." The agent's choice proves to be a manifestation of a stable and abiding character that is informed by a conviction concerning what is "choice worthy by nature" or beautiful. The moral agent qua moral is not in reality free to choose or pursue what he or she believes to be base or bad.

Virtue of character, according to Aristotle, is a mean condition between "natural virtue" and virtue in the "governing sense" (*NE*, 1144b15). Human virtue in the governing or precise sense presupposes the exercise of practical wisdom or prudence as the authors admit and even emphasize. Prudence is defined by Aristotle as a "truth-disclosing disposition involving reason that governs action, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being" (1140b5–7). The pursuit of the good and avoidance of the bad by those exercising practical wisdom cannot properly be understood as an act of volitional consciousness because the acts of the prudent follow from what is

understood by the human intellect. What marks the activity of thinking that pertains to action as working well is “truth that stands in agreement with right desire” (1139a30). In this context, Aristotle redefines choice or “deliberate desire” as “right desire” from within the horizon of moral virtue, and then as “either intellect fused with desire or desire fused with thinking” from the standpoint of practical wisdom (1139b5). It is the unity of desire and intellect that is the principle governing the activity of the prudent. It is for this reason that it appears to be impossible for the prudent to choose or pursue what he or she understands to be bad. “Nor is it possible for the same person to be possessed of practical wisdom and at the same time be unrestrained” (1152a7). For, says Aristotle, it would be a terrible thing if, “when knowledge is present, something else were to master it and drag it around like a slave” (1145b25). The pursuit of the good or self-perfection is not an act “volitional consciousness,” self-direction, or “freedom of choice.” It appears rather to follow from an understanding of what it is that is the one thing needful for the practically wise. It is perhaps for this reason that Descartes, one of the modern thinkers, observes that knowledge eliminates choice while it enhances human freedom (*Fourth Meditation*), and Thomas Aquinas, one of the medieval thinkers, seems to indicate that knowledge of the good is as determinative of the human will as the principle of non-contradiction is of the human intellect (*Summa Theologica*, I–IIae, q. 94, a. 2). Aristotle’s argument in the *Ethics* proves that the principle governing all acts of moral virtue is either the noble (books II–IV) or the good (book VI), but in neither case is a morally virtuous act an exercise of self-direction or “freedom of choice.”

Finally, as indicated above, individualistic perfectionism is a form of moral pluralism. It teaches that there is “no single best form of human flourishing” but “only specific forms of human flourishing” that are “best for specific individuals” (Rasmussen and Den Uyl 2005, 81, 137, 249). The authors move from the position that each individual’s *telos* consists in the pursuit of the form of flourishing that is best for him or her to the view that “no form of flourishing is objectively or naturally superior to any other” (147, 279). This latter view, however, in no way follows from the individuality premise and is incompatible with the authors’ own doctrine of teleological eudaimonism. Human beings possess an “inherent potentiality” to actualize the

capacities, goods, and virtues of human nature. The specific form of flourishing appropriate for each individual is the standard by which to judge whether or not an individual is faring well. The standard used to evaluate the goodness of a particular instance of a specific form of flourishing can and ought to be applied to the forms of flourishing themselves. A form of flourishing that necessarily impedes the actualization of a capacity, good, or virtue of human nature would have to be judged inferior to another that did not do so. Aristotle, for example, argues that while it is excellent to practice virtue with regard to one's own affairs, it is an even greater excellence to practice virtue in relation to others (*NE*, 1129b32). He implies that the public life of the politician or judge is naturally superior to the private life of the moneymaker or athlete. The public life of the politician or judge necessarily engages and actualizes a greater number of the human capacities, goods, and virtues than is possible to be engaged and actualized by a private man. It would appear that that form of human flourishing that required the possession, integration, and exercise of all of the capacities, goods, and virtues of human nature would be simply best. Such a form would manifest the nature of human nature to the highest possible degree of perfection. This form belongs to the philosopher (Plato, *Republic* VI, 487a). In fact, it is the political philosopher who is the "master craftsman of the end to which we look when we speak of each thing as bad or good simply" (Aristotle, *NE*, 1152b2). The authors' doctrine of teleological eudaimonism proves to be incompatible both with their teaching concerning human equality and with their understanding of human freedom. Their doctrine of individuality is incompatible with their doctrine of perfectionism. For this reason, their attempt to establish the true ethical foundations of the liberal political/legal order by deriving the right to liberty from the duty to self-perfect or flourish is theoretically problematic (65, 268).

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