

Revisiting Pettit's formula for freedom in a choice

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This article argues that the neo-republican ideal of freedom as non-domination suffers from prioritizing interpersonal freedom and consequently overlooks relevant threats to individual liberty that stem from structural and systemic factors. We attempt to underscore this limitation through an analysis of Pettit's account of what constitutes freedom in a given choice. It will be shown that, within the non-domination account, the emphasis placed on the interpersonal dimension of liberty leads to the occlusion of other necessary requirements for a choice to be considered 'free'. This is made clear when considering the impact of industrial concentration in capitalist economies.

Freedom as non-domination

A good deal of Philip Pettit's philosophical work has been devoted to articulating and refining the ideal of freedom as non-domination. Pettit's advocacy for this conception of liberty is in large measure a revitalization of the pre-liberal understanding of freedom that retained a hegemonic status from Ancient Rome up to the American Revolution. At the core of this traditional view of freedom as non-domination is the master-slave relationship. Unsurprisingly, slave societies – notably Ancient Rome – tended to conceptualize the free person (*liber*) in opposition to the slave (*servus*). As Pettit puts it: “In the longer history, the antonym of freedom is slavery or, more generally, subjection to the will of another...”¹

Republicans argue that the acute unfreedom of the slave is the conjunction of (a) their total dependency on a power that can (b) interfere with them in an entirely arbitrary manner. At any point in time the master can subordinate the will of the slave to his own private whims. In

¹Philip Pettit, “Agency-Freedom and Option-Freedom,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 15, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 394.

such a state, the slave is unable to act on her own volition, as her choices are always effectively under the control of a master. Liberty as non-domination thus conceives of the free person as someone whose choices (in relation to their basic liberties) cannot be arbitrarily manipulated by another.

The ‘interpersonal’ formula for freedom in a choice

In *Just Freedom*, Pettit sets out to provide more clarity on what exactly this kind of freedom requires. He suggests that one approach is to “concentrate on how you might enjoy freedom in a particular choice... [by] explicating the requirements that must be fulfilled in any choice that is going to count as incontrovertibly free”.² Pettit attempts to do just that by presenting a ‘formula’ that will allow us to determine whether someone is free in the act of choosing among a set of options. The three conditions he identifies are the following:

1. You have the room and resources to enact the option you prefer,
2. Whatever your own preferences over those options, and
3. Whatever the preference of any other as to how you should choose³

According to Pettit, if these conditions are true when a given choice is made, then it is a free one: they ensure that in the act of making that choice you are sufficiently inoculated from manipulation by an alien power.

It is argued herein that these conditions are necessary but not sufficient for guaranteeing that one enjoys freedom as non-domination ‘in a particular choice’. To be sure, these conditions go a long way in securing a chooser against interpersonal threats to their freedom. The notion of ‘interpersonal freedom’ localizes the presence and absence of freedom to the intentional actions of other agents. Felix Oppenheim argues that one enjoys interpersonal freedom when, “*A does not make it impossible for B to do either x_1 , or x_2 , or...etc., and A would not punish B for doing any of those action.*”⁴ Interpersonal unfreedom, on the other hand, is demarcated by an arrangement where, “*A makes it impossible for B to do x or A would punish B if B did x* ” (354).

The critical point is that a view of freedom conceived in interpersonal terms focuses on how an individual or group might be interfered with by another individual or group. The

²Philip Pettit, *Just Freedom: A Moral Compass for a Complex World* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 29.

³Ibid, 30.

⁴Felix E. Oppenheim, “Interpersonal Freedom and Freedom of Action,” *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 2 (1955): 356.

three conditions outlined by Pettit reasonably protect individual (A) from attempts by (B) to make it impossible for (A) to choose x – and in that sense assure their interpersonal freedom. If (A) has the room and resources to enact their preference, can act regardless of their own preferences and the preferences of others (including B), it seems the choice in question would be a free one. In short, the formula offered by Pettit honors an understanding of freedom that originates from the dynamics of the relationship between a powerful master and a dominated slave.

Monopolies and the limits of interpersonal freedom

The problem with Pettit's formula is that it seems to prioritize only interpersonal impingements on one's ability to choose – and this has concerning implications. Indeed, the central thrust of the non-domination ideal – that is, what critically separates it from other conceptions of liberty like 'non-interference' – is the third requirement: that one be able to act regardless of the preferences of others. As Pettit notes, "the third clause in the formula goes on to pick up the most distinctive and important element on which republicans focu[s]." ⁵ In fact, one could argue that the first two clauses (particularly the first one) amount to pre-conditions for the third clause. Thus, the central focus of non-domination is to realize conditions that prevent persons from being dominated (i.e. having their choices manipulated) by others – something one would expect from an ideal of freedom that begins its analysis from a particular interpersonal (master-slave) relationship.

Whilst there is much to be said about the robustness of freedom as non-domination when it comes to safeguarding interpersonal freedom, it can remain blind to the ways individual liberty can be curtailed by non-personal, or 'structural and systemic', forces that shape our lives. Consider the consequences of industrial concentration as an example. In *The Myth of Capitalism*, Jonathan Tepper and Denise Hearn have collated a stark account of the wide-ranging deleterious effects of industrial sectors being dominated by a monopoly, duopoly, or even oligopoly. ⁶ When the number of sellers in a given industry narrows down to only a few due to mergers and buyouts, the remaining companies obtain incredible market power. This means that these companies set the terms of exchange as opposed to competitive market forces – they become price makers, not takers.

To be sure, the freedom-endangering implications of an industry being under monopolistic control are well known: 'prices can be hiked without loss of business', 'options are

⁵Pettit, *Just Freedom*, 46.

⁶Jonathan Tepper, *The Myth of Capitalism: Monopolies and the Death of Competition* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

eliminated’, ‘political power grows with economic power’, etc. Yet, one of the less-frequently discussed consequences of monopolization raised by Tepper and Hearn is how monopolization prevents alternative possibilities from coming into existence by dampening innovation and investment. This happens for a variety of reasons: (a) the erection of a higher barrier to entry prevents new companies from entering the market, (b) promising startups are frequently acquired (and sometimes their work is never continued), and (c) monopolistic firms have little incentive to invest in research and development to facilitate the creation of new products.

The existence of a monopoly stifles innovative processes – such as Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’ – and thereby blocks potential choices we might have had if the industry had never concentrated in the first place. In other words, it is the monopoly’s mere presence that limits or impinges upon our choices by frustrating the growth of alternative worlds in the form of consumer markets. What needs to be stressed is that this specific infringement on the choices of consumers is not the result of direct (or intentional) acts by the monopoly to interfere in the lives of consumers. That is, the consumer’s loss of choice is not the result of an interpersonal act where the company ‘makes it impossible for the consumer to x’ or ‘punishes the consumer for doing x’ for the simple reason that x does not yet exist! Because the choice of (x) never manifested to begin with, as a result of the monopolistic nature of the industry, that choice cannot technically be interfered with or manipulated. Nevertheless, the absence of that choice is certainly freedom-limiting.

Revising Pettit’s formula

We have considered just one example highlighting why an ideal of freedom must take into account choice manipulation via non-interpersonal means. The ordering of society – the institutions and social logics it is comprised of – can curtail the freedom of individuals even without any ostensible interferer. Surely, the clauses of freedom in a given choice offered by Pettit are necessary. But the formula may need to be amended to include threats to the freedom of choosers that are the product of structural and systemic relations. For instance, to address the case of the monopoly preventing choices from coming into existence, perhaps a fourth clause should be introduced. It might state something along the lines of: “your choices are protected from conditions that needlessly narrow them.” The historical record makes clear that the presence of monopolies narrows our choices and does so on a needless basis – we can have well-functioning, dynamic markets without heavy industrial concentration.⁷

Of course, the formula may never be perfectly complete. Or maybe the formula must be reworked entirely to retain its elegant simplicity and yet still capture interpersonal, structural,

⁷David Dayen, *Monopolized: Life in the Age of Corporate Power* (New Press, 2020).

and systemic threats to an individual's ability to choose freely. What is clear for now is that Pettit's current formula is insufficient.