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Self-Realization and Justice

A Liberal-Perfectionist Defense of the Right to Freedom from Employment

Julia Maskivker

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A Adriana y Ricardo,
mis padres, con amor profundo y gratitud eterna.

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Preface

The motivation to write this book developed from my recognition of an important gap in the justice literature. I wondered, 'Why don't contemporary thinkers analyze higher-order human goods such as self-realization within the purview of distributive fairness, generally?' The failure to do so, I thought, may be traceable to a suspicion of grand ethical theories that prescribe a "correct" way to reach human virtue. The exaltation of virtuous traits can easily lend itself to oppressive uses of philosophy with undesirable political consequences. Isaiah Berlin, that great figure in political theory, warned us of that danger. This book, however, presents the idea that philosophy can reconcile itself with praise of higher-order human goods while still shielding itself from hierarchical conceptualizations of the human condition.

In this book, I define self-realization narrowly, as the development and exercise of human talents and aptitudes, innate and acquired. While inspired by Aristotle's vision of human excellence, my notion of self-realization is devoid of worrisome assumptions that led Aristotle to assert that some individuals are morally superior to others. The central claim in the book is that society has an obligation to distribute opportunities for self-realization fairly. That is, in the context of a market economy that does not reward valuable talents that happen to be unappreciated, society should provide equal access to self-realization opportunities. Thus, the option to (partially) opt out of marketable work becomes a crucial mechanism by which to achieve the ideal of equal access to self-realization.

Underlying the self-realization ideal is the rejection of vacuous forms of activity, hence the morally perfectionist, yet liberal, tone of my theory. I do not argue, however, that the right to exit work in the paid economy is unconditional. In the book, I explain that important considerations of "fair play" dictate that the beneficiaries of the right to opt out of work have a duty to contribute to society in some fashion, albeit not necessarily through work in the market. This requirement distinguishes my views from traditional defenses of Basic Income, which highlight the desirability of unconditional social policy.

The present book is the outgrowth—both personally and intellectually—of my experience as a doctoral student at Columbia University. As any PhD candidate would surely agree, the challenges of developing a dissertation that is original and intelligent while not overambitious in scale can be paralyzing. However, the search for such a topic eventually took my mind in directions that would lead me to find what I was looking for. Although it has evolved significantly, the seeds of this book's general argument were planted at the beautiful libraries of Columbia, on the Upper West Side of New York, as well as in the welcoming cafes that surround that area. There, I could see how fortunate I was to be able to do what I love, on my time, despite the anxieties involved in meeting deadlines and advisors' expectations. Recognition of my own privileged status led me to reflect: 'What of all those who are not so lucky? What about those for whom self-realization seems to be an inaccessible luxury? Does justice have anything to say about their unfortunate fate?'

Writing this book awoke many concerns that were not easy to reconcile at first. Is it legitimate to worry about the fairness of the distribution of opportunities for human flourishing when poverty, famine, AIDS, and oppression threaten the lives of millions around the globe and in the United States? Such preoccupations are present throughout the book, as I am aware that justice centrally involves issues related to the fulfillment of basic necessities and guarantees. However, a concern for human flourishing is not inconsistent with more traditional fairness considerations. If we take a comprehensive perspective on the conditions of human development, it is hard not to recognize that higher-order developmental needs are as essential to a healthy existence as lower-order physiological necessities, once the latter have been attended to. This is no small caveat, but it should not prevent one from normative reflection on the justness of societies that deny individuals the possibility of self-growth in a fuller sense than stable survival. This issue is inextricably linked to a broader, double-sided question in the contemporary justice literature: Namely, what does society owe individuals as a matter of right and what do individuals owe society as a matter of duty? This book is an attempt to provide an answer to that query, if only partial. Along the way, I became indebted to many friends who generously illuminated my thinking with their contributions and suggestions.

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1 Introduction

Self-Realization and Distributive Justice: When the Market Is Not Sufficient for Equal Access

The question this book seeks to answer is 'How can citizens both achieve individual self-realization and justly distribute the burdens and benefits of labor?' Philosophers and political theorists have pondered this question for millennia. My answer is based on a defense of freedom from wage labor, and rejects an (assumed) reciprocal duty of social contribution through work performed in the context of the market. I address the following specific questions: What benefits and goods are citizens entitled to, and under which (if any) conditions are societies obliged to provide those entitlements?

My approach differs from existing arguments for decoupling paid employment from economic survival via unconditional welfare benefits. Basic Income theory, for example, justifies the payment of universal and unconditional social benefits. Based on ideals of collective ownership of natural resources, along with strong conceptions of individual rights, it argues for a society that links employment and income more loosely than most capitalist frameworks. The benefits are not means-tested and are not contingent on individual willingness to work. This type of society improves the situation of the most vulnerable and the poor, and does not punish those who prefer not to work. Defenders of Basic Income argue that any scheme of contingent benefits discriminates against people with a strong taste for leisure (understood as time off work) and a weak taste for money, compared to those who want money and are willing to work for it.[1] These discussions have sparked heated debates within the realm of economic citizenship theory, impacting welfare state philosophy and theories of justice more broadly.

Although I share the emancipatory objectives that inspire Basic Income and related proposals, this book presents a different justification for decoupling work from economic subsistence. It is based on an original and controversial idea regarding which goods society should distribute justly among its members. My claim is that opportunities for self-realization constitute legitimate objects of distributive justice. I offer a distinctive reappraisal of self-realization which, despite its liberal orientation, is in tension with the Basic Income theorists' ethically neutral assumptions about the value of human preferences.

I conceptualize self-realization as a higher-order developmental human need, and propose that society should provide fair and equal opportunities to enable its members to fulfill this need. My conceptualization of self-realization is quite narrow: It concerns the meaningful development and exercise of human talents, skills, and abilities. In Aristotelian terms, it involves the attainment of some sort of 'excellence' understood in terms of typically human potentialities. Thinkers throughout the ages have tended to treat the notion of excellence or self-realization comprehensively, exalting the morally edifying characteristics of certain virtues. Aristotle was the paradigmatic proponent of this view. His notion of excellence, like Plato's, included both intellectual development and a critical assessment of the individual's 'soul', or moral worth. An excellent individual, in the classical view, is extremely intelligent and highly moral, exhibiting the virtues of moderation, courage, selflessness, wisdom, and a sense of justice, among other things. Different versions of this 'moralistic' vision of personal excellence have appeared throughout the history of philosophy, albeit with different emphases.

Unlike the classical view, my conceptualization of self-realization does not include moralistic prescriptions about individual character. My basic assumption is that a self-realized life is better, all things considered, than one devoid of this good, but this book will not be concerned with the 'moral stature' of individuals. I am skeptical of the 'moral' approach for two basic reasons: First, assumptions that some people are morally better than others are dangerous and ethically unfounded. This is an ontological claim that speaks to the very nature of philosophy. We 'moderns' simply do not draw the same distinctions as the 'ancients' did about natural moral superiority. In highlighting the normative desirability of developing distinctively human talents, I adhere to the modern view that 'all men (and women) are created equal.' This assumption implies, practically speaking, that human powers are equally distributed among the population, a founding premise of modernity. No one "type" of human being is naturally superior to any other type. Hobbes puts it illustratively:

> "Nature has made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he [. . .] And as to the faculties of the mind [. . .], I find yet a greater equality amongst men than that of strength." (Hobbes 1981: 183)

Furthermore, the methodological imperative of focus compels me to restrict my analysis of self-realization to the sphere of human talents and skills. Human development, as I explain in subsequent chapters, is

multi-dimensional. Psychologists, philosophers, political theorists, and sociologists all have something to say about this complex issue. Healthy human development requires the formation of close emotional bonds. as well as understanding of complex ethical questions, the capacity to make rational choices, to assume responsibility for one's actions, and more controversially, to participate in the political community. So in theory, there are many different ways to achieve human excellence. This book cannot be concerned with all of them. Many theorists use the term 'self-realization', 'human excellence', or 'self-fulfillment' as a catch-all term to encompass all sorts of virtues and developments that cut across the above-mentioned categories. My approach will steer clear of such conceptual vagueness (however desirable at times) to concentrate strictly on the realm of skill and the development of talents.

The third reason this book avoids taking a moralistic tone about human excellence is that I conceive of self-realization, when applied to worthwhile pursuits, as a natural (psychological) and universal human need. This assumption distinguishes fulfillment of this need from the attainment of ethical virtue understood as a set of praiseworthy individual traits, which reflect the good nature of their owner. In my "naturalistic" perspective, fulfilling the need for self-realization means that some conditions for psychological health have been met, not that the individual is virtuous *per se*.

Discussion of psychological health, as the following chapters will clarify, does not amount to putting 'welfare' or 'well-being' (as revealed by personal preferences) on a normative pedestal, making it the 'metric' of justice. For one thing, individual preferences do not always correlate with 'better' lives. For another, the justice literature distinguishes 'fundamental human interests' from 'individual preferences', setting basic needs apart from mere desires. The claim, briefly, is that humans have a fundamental interest in meeting their basic needs. The scientific literature on human development provides ample evidence that basic human needs include psychological as well as physical health. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, all these needs are essential for ongoing personal growth and integrity. Although psychological and emotional needs are not as apparently basic as physiological needs, in the sense that, when unfulfilled, they do not imperil physical survival, they are basic in the sense that they are necessary for mental and existential development. This aspect of necessity, and the fact that the needs are universal (with some exceptions) distinguishes this category of general human needs from particular subjective desires.

My naturalistic approach to self-realization challenges the ethical neutralism of Basic Income accounts in that I reject as potential objects of policy protection forms of human (in)activity that do not meet the criteria for self-realization, which I spell out in the book. This non-neutral approach commits me to a defense of perfectionism. In the sphere of morality (and public policy) perfectionism implies the fundamental principle that the state should favor particular moral or ethical ideals. According to the defender

of perfectionism, "the state should not strive to be neutral between conceptions of the good, but should promote valid or sound conceptions of the good and discourage worthless ones" (Wall et al. 2003: 1).

Since this book clearly espouses the idea that a life in pursuit of self-realization is valuable, it follows that the state which distributes opportunities for self-realization fairly is adhering to a particular conception of the good. This is not a reason for concern. Moral perfectionism does not have to undermine our most cherished freedoms. Considering certain modes of life more valuable than others (for example, that becoming a violinist is more valuable than becoming a drug addict) or simply acknowledging the negative value of certain lifestyles, does not amount to saying that the state should intervene coercively to ensure that citizens live the type of life it considers morally superior. After all, the state already displays a quasi-perfectionist position but does not impose its views on individuals. It promotes and subsidizes art, among other things, and discourages tobacco consumption, signaling that the former is valuable, and the latter harmful. Although discussion of state neutrality issues would take an altogether different book (or two), in ths book I provide a persuasive justification for a perfectionist position that is compatible with traditional liberal values. I argue that state policies which facilitate self-realization do not commit the state to their inverse: policies that denigrate or penalize other lifestyles or pursuits.

So the discussion of issues of moral perfectionism and state neutrality must distinguish between conceptions of the good based on the alleged outright moral superiority of one lifestyle over all others, on the one hand, and conceptions of the good based on what I call a 'naturalistic' view of human development, on the other. The premise of the latter is the fact that there is a uniquely human need that makes those lifestyles desirable simply because they are good for people, although individuals may not always be aware of this 'desirability' for reasons I develop throughout the book (which may include weakness of will, poverty, deprivation, and exploitation).

Although the classical account (paradigmatically Aristotle's) claims the intrinsic superiority of certain pursuits, it does not refer to human needs. Apart from the vague idea that the alleged human capacity to be enlightened by 'reason' will direct some to pursue virtue, the classical view of human development does not clarify what makes some lives better than others. From the classical perspective, for example, the very fact of human reason makes intellectual pursuits the highest form of human activity. But why should this particular sort of life be superior to other equally demanding, higher activities such as arduous athletic training, to give but one example? My naturalistic approach to self-realization avoids these difficulties because it does not define value in terms of a narrow set of lifestyles.

This book argues that society's failure to offer equal opportunities for self-realization imposes arbitrary limitations on individuals. The source of this arbitrariness is the fact that the market rewards talents and pursuits that are economically profitable, while disdaining unprofitable

talents whose value derives from non-market criteria. My thesis, then, critiques the market as an inefficient mechanism for allocating opportunities for self-realization. Although the market is the least bad distributor of goods known so far (with the aid of state regulation to keep it from 'failing'), it is not clear that it is also the least bad allocator of opportunities for self-realization.

I argue that fairness demands that the market be supplemented with an alternative mechanism for distributing opportunities for self-realization. Any society that relies solely on market logic to distribute self-realization opportunities risks being perceived as illegitimate by those whose talents and skills are under-appreciated by the majoritarian consumer public whose choices are expressed in the market. This is worrisome because, from the perspective of justice, basic features of society should be analyzed as if they could have been the product of a common agreement among individuals whose fundamental interests are affected by the functioning of basic social arrangements. This reasoning, which holds that the perspectives of all parties affected by a decision or policy should be taken into account if a society is to be considered (minimally) just, constitutes the 'moral contractualist' version of justice (Scanlon 1998). The actual mechanisms that mediate such consideration will vary according to circumstance, but the normative principle at play is unequivocal: Decisions about how to organize the fundamental aspects of society should include the viewpoints of all individuals and groups directly affected by those decisions. Because the market is obviously a pervasive basic institution in contemporary societies—part of what Rawls would call the 'basic structure'—its workings should be analyzed under the logic of a moral contractualist vision.

Intuitions concerning fair play dictate that those who benefit from a cooperative enterprise such as society should also be 'burdened' with a duty to reciprocate to the scheme generating the common benefits. There is a very basic way in which free-riding is in tension with justice, as it disrupts the fair allocation of effort. But if the cooperative enterprise in question fails to fulfill important requirements of justice, does the moral obligation of contribution remain unaffected? This book argues that it does not. The fact that society is fundamentally biased against non-marketable talents challenges the assumption that individuals adversely affected by those biases still have a stringent obligation to reciprocate to society via paid employment.

Underpinning the argument for freedom from marketable work is a fundamental concern for individual independence understood, broadly, as freedom from the whims of others. A healthy sense of social fellowship, I claim, is only possible when individuals are able to live in a society that secures the conditions for each individual to be free from the potentially oppressive desires of others. Physical coercion is not the only medium of domination. This book is not concerned with traditionally coercive dynamics of brute force or threats. Economic necessity, paradigmatically, is a

much subtler, yet highly coercive force. This book highlights one particular aspect of coerciveness: the abandonment of the pursuit of self-realization in the absence of effective freedom to ignore the demands of the market economy (i.e., the consumer choices of others) due to the pressing need to make a living.

This book also acknowledges the legitimate demand for socially necessary activities such as teaching and nursing, among many others. Society is obliged to fulfill these socially necessary tasks while pursuing ways to free its members from the coercion of the market. That said, the central argument in this book is that society is obliged to offer its members the opportunity to engage in non-economically productive, yet worthwhile activities. I claim that this opportunity is a right, but this right is actionable *if and only if* the material conditions are sufficient for it to be operationalized. The latter is no small caveat. These conditions usually occur in economically and politically advanced societies. In a far from just world, the vast majority of people are subject to grave inequalities. The moral weight of world injustice cannot be ignored, and normative claims that imply subtracting resources and attention from possible solutions to the plight of the poor and vulnerable, either at home or abroad, require careful scrutiny. I am cognizant of the serious moral conflict between a concern for justice in the sphere of self-realization and work, and a concern for justice in access to basic social goods. As will become clear in the body of the book, I do not claim any priority for my arguments. My discussion of self-realization and employment is not intended to downplay the urgency of other justice issues, either domestic or global.

The ancient philosophers—Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero—viewed the purpose of leisure as self-development.[2] In common usage, the Greek term *schole* denoted time free from all things economically useful or directly related to making a living. This classical ideal of leisure related to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.[3] Although ancient Mediterranean societies depended on an oppressive system of slavery which made free time for some possible at the expense of others, the abstract concept of *schole* can have a modern meaning: Freedom from necessity and freedom to achieve self-realization may be within the reach of all, not just the wealthy.

Bertrand Russell, writing in the 1930s, appears to share this emancipating view when he claims that "[m]odern technique has made it possible for leisure, within limits, to be not the prerogative of small privileged classes, but a right evenly distributed throughout the community. The morality of work is the morality of slaves, and the modern world has no need of slavery" (Russell 1936: 14). Russell argues that praise of hard work arose as a tool of domination by the landed and privileged classes under a pre-industrial system characterized by slender economic surplus. It has remained in the collective imaginary ever since. Although Russell's claims apply more forcefully to physical labor than to white collar work, they still contain a grain of truth: Technology and industrialization render working hours shorter

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