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Mastery and Liberty

An interview with Quentin Skinner

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SS: During last twenty years or so you have written extensively on liberty. How did you get interested in this theme?

QS: I think I can discern two phases in the development of my interest. When in the 1970s I was writing my book, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, I devoted much of the first volume to examining the political theory that emerged out of the city-republics of Renaissance Italy. I was struck and puzzled by the disposition of those who wrote in defence of the city-republics to describe their independent systems of elective self-government as systems of *libertas* or liberty. Previous scholars had of course noticed this apparent equation between freedom and self-government. But they had tended to apply to it a distinction -- made famous by Isaiah Berlin, although now discredited --

between allegedly ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ understandings of the idea of liberty. They were thus led to insist that the equation one finds, for example, in Machiavelli’s *Discorsi* between living *in libertà* and living in a *vivere civile* must have been an expression of the belief that liberty has a ‘positive’ content: that it can be filled out, so to speak, as the claim that what it means to be free is to play a role in a civil association of a distinctively republican or democratic kind.

It seemed to me, by contrast, that when the republican political theorists of the Renaissance, including Machiavelli, spoke about civic liberty, they usually described it in wholly ‘negative’ terms, equating the possession of freedom with the absence of any external interference in their affairs, and hence with the absence of servitude. Soon after the appearance of my book, in which I tried to highlight this political vocabulary, I published an article in a volume I co-edited entitled *Philosophy in History* (which appeared in 1984) in which I tried to show that the concept of ‘positive’ liberty is of no use in analysing or explaining the Renaissance debate. Writers like Machiavelli, I argued, worked with a largely familiar understanding of negative liberty, according to which the presence of liberty is always marked by an absence, and specifically an absence of interference .

I date the beginning of the second phase of my interest in these issues to the year 1994. I held a Visiting Fellowship during that year at the Australian National University, and there I gave a joint seminar on questions about liberty with Philip Pettit. Philip pointed out to me that the theory of freedom I had isolated was not wholly, or even basically, concerned with absence of interference, although that notion is of course present in the Renaissance texts. The most basic contention of the Renaissance writers, he wanted to argue, was that freedom is infringed as soon as you acquire a master. He concluded that one ought to think of the Renaissance understanding of negative liberty as concerned not so much with acts of interference, but rather with background conditions of domination and mastery. Liberty itself, Philip proposed, should be equated with what he called non-domination.

This seemed to me a luminous insight, and Philip went on to develop it brilliantly in his now celebrated book, *Republicanism*, which he published in 1997. Meanwhile I continued to work on the same issues, although in a slightly different way. Preferring to invoke the specific vocabulary used by the Renaissance writers themselves, I went on to argue that their distinctive view of negative liberty is best understood as the claim that we are free if and only if we are independent -- if we are able to act independently of the arbitrary will of others. To lack this

independence, I also argued, is what the Renaissance writers meant by living in servitude. I went on to publish these views in a little book which I called *Liberty Before Liberalism*, which likewise appeared in 1997.

While Philip and I have continued to operate with different vocabularies, there is one cardinal point on which we agree, although my re-articulation of my earlier view owes much to my discussions with Philip. By contrast with the assumption -- largely prevailing in contemporary political theory -- that the presence of freedom is basically marked by absence of interference, we have both come to insist that the capacity to interfere with the freedom of others is merely a surface manifestation of a deeper affront to liberty. The real affront, as I would now want to express it, is embodied in being made to live in conditions of dependence on arbitrary power. The crucial point for both of us, I think is that there can therefore be loss of freedom even in the absence of any acts of interference.

SS: "Neo-Roman" or "republican" liberty?

QS: As I've been saying, my work on the theory of freedom initially centred on the ideas I uncovered in Renaissance republican thought, and above all in Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, which

I continue to regard (as did many early-modern republicans) as one of the most illuminating discussions of the distinction between freedom and servitude. No one in the early-modern period who professed to be a republican (in the strict sense of being an opponent of monarchy) failed to espouse the view of freedom that Philip Pettit and I have singled out. This may help to explain why Philip decided to entitle his book *Republicanism*. The difficulty, however, is that many early-modern writers who would have been horrified to be labelled as republicans nevertheless espoused what Philip calls the republican idea of liberty. To take only the most obvious example from the Anglophone tradition, John Locke distinguishes freedom from slavery in just the way I sought to do in answering your first question, but in his political theory Locke firmly defends an ideal of mixed monarchy, not an ideal of republican self-government.

One reason why I suggested that we should instead speak of the ‘neo-Roman’ theory of liberty was to meet this difficulty. But I had a further reason, which was that the most influential text in which the distinction between liberty and slavery is drawn in precisely the manner that interests me is the *Digest* of Roman Law. The opening rubric *De statu hominum* distinguishes the free man from the slave, and proceeds to define the condition of slavery as one of living in dependence on -- and hence at the mercy of --

someone else. The condition of the *liber homo* or free man is defined by contrast as one in which you are able to act *sui iuris*, according to your own right, and hence according to your own independent will and judgment.

I seem, however, to have lost this part of the argument. The last few years have seen an extensive discussion of the views that Philip and I developed in the 1990s, and practically everyone seems to agree that the most interesting distinction is between ‘republican’ and ‘liberal’ theories of liberty. I still think that this way of putting the point is both misleading and anachronistic. But as I say, few contributors to the debate seem to mind, and in my own most recent book on the theory of freedom, which was published earlier this year, I finally yielded to the majority and called it *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*.

SS: What is the relevance, if there is any relevance, of academic philosophical (and historical) discussions on liberty to our society?

QS: Here I need, I think, to begin by making a strong distinction. I am by trade an historian, and my research on the theory of freedom is as historical as I can make it. My motive for pursuing this research, however, is not historical at all -- and indeed I sometimes

feel suspicious of those historians who seek to justify their investigations by telling us that a knowledge of the past is worth having 'for its own sake'. I study the past because I hope that, if we can manage to reconstitute the beliefs of other societies as scrupulously as possible, they may have something to tell us about our own society and our own beliefs.

This undoubtedly holds true, I would argue, in the case of the 'republican' theory of liberty. It is an unfamiliar theory, and many contemporary political philosophers have tried to dismiss it as confused. But I see nothing confused about it. The view that political liberty essentially consists in being independent of arbitrary power certainly contradicts the prevailing liberal view that we cannot complain of a loss of liberty unless we are subjected to active interference. But this hardly shows that the alternative view is confused; it simply shows that it is unfamiliar. What I am arguing is that this very unfamiliarity is what makes it worth thinking about, and perhaps especially at the present time.

Although I am primarily an historian, I should like to end by saying a word about the contemporary scene. As a number of commentators have rightly begun to complain, the citizens of many democratic societies are currently witnessing a marked erosion of their civil liberties. It seems to me, however, that this complaint is often presented at the wrong level, so to speak. It tends to be

presented as a claim that our civil rights are increasingly being infringed. While this accusation is well-grounded, I want to argue that what should concern us more is the background of arbitrary and discretionary power increasingly wielded by modern executives. Not only does the possession of such power enable them to interfere with civil rights at will; the very fact that so much of their power is discretionary constitutes an affront to liberty in itself. It leaves us increasingly in a state of dependence upon the will -- and hence the mere goodwill -- of our rulers, thereby undermining the rule of law in a particularly insidious way. As I have been suggesting, the insouciance of so many liberal political theorists in the face of this gathering threat seems to me to stem from a fundamental mistake they make in analysing the concept of liberty itself. To end by reiterating the point I have been making all along, they conceive of freedom as absence of interference when we ought I think to conceive of it essentially as absence of dependence.