Chapter x10: Conclusion

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[A] certain small income, sufficient for necessaries, should be secured to all, whether they work or not, and ... a larger income, as much larger as might be warranted by the total amount of commodities produced, should be given to those who are willing to engage in some work which the community recognizes as useful. On this basis we may build further.

-Bertrand Russell

This book has begun a tentative exploration of Justice as the Pursuit of Accord (JPA) or independarianism. JPA involves three central ideas: (1) People’s first duty is try to stay out of each other’s way. This duty entails the respect for each other’s need to maintain core wellbeing, and their equal entitlement to the most important liberties—i.e. to status freedom. (2) When it is not possible to stay out of each other’s way, people’s duty is to seek accord; to seek an agreement in which each party literally accepts the sacrifices they make in exchange for the sacrifices others make on their behalf. (3) When universal accord is not possible—and it is usually not possible—people’s duty is to seek both the widest possible agreement and the minimum negative impact on dissenters (i.e. those who cannot be brought into agreement).

This book has provided an in-depth discussion of only one aspect of independarianism: the effort to identify the most important liberties or to provide a theory of status freedom. Chapter 2 argued that status freedom is best understood as
effective control self-ownership (ECSO freedom): the effective power to make and to refuse active cooperation with other willing people. To have this power a person must have independence, freedom from directly and indirectly forced service to others. Independent people require civil and political rights, control of their persons, and access to a sufficient amount of resources so that they can meet their basic needs without serving anyone else’s interests. Any person or group that interferes with others’ ability to meet their needs on their own or with a people of their choosing forces them (indirectly but effectively) to serve the interests of at least one person who controls resources. I observed that most political theories and modern democracies usually avoid directly forced service but do not sufficiently avoid indirectly forced service. Therefore, freedom from indirectly forced service takes up much of the discussion of this book.

Chapter 3 discussed the implications of prioritizing the protection of personal independence, arguing that different institutions might be appropriate ways to secure the effective component of personal independence in different societies, but that the best way to do so in a modern industrial society is with an unconditional basic income guarantee.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 argued for the importance of personal independence from an ethical and a practical perspective. They argue that we need to respect each other’s independence to respect each other as truly free and equal citizens and that the protection of independence can be an important mechanism to protect the weak and the vulnerable from poverty, exploitation, and injustice.

Chapters 7 and 8 considered the relationship between the theory of ECSO freedom and other theories of freedom and social justice, arguing that few of the theories discussed fundamentally conflict with respect for personal independence and
that most would be stronger and more consistent in their support for substantive
freedom and equality if they incorporated respect for independence.

Chapter 9 addressed the question of duty, specifically considering whether
people have enforceable obligations to each other that might reduce the concern for
independence or reverse the support for basic income argued for in earlier chapters.
The chapter showed that JPA doesn’t rule out the possibility of enforceable duties, but
JPA’s support for the most substantive equal freedom for all puts significant limits on
the majority’s power to force individuals to actively serve others, such that all people
would have to perform equally onerous duties for equal pay and that the ruling
government would have to commit itself to a good faith effort to get out of the
situation in which it is necessary to enforce duties. If circumstances prevent us from
respecting everyone’s independence throughout their lives, we should hold everyone
(rich or poor) to an equally onerous duty of active service for a limited number of
years, and then let everyone enjoy their status as free individuals for as many years of
their lives as possible.

I do not believe that the recognition of personal independence is all there is to
social justice. It is merely a basis on which we may build further. I hope to flesh out
JPA more in future works, but I do believe the arguments here are significant, and I
would like to use this last chapter to underline that significance.

The independantarian perspective is not about speaking for the poor, the
propertyless, the disadvantaged, or dissenters. It is about giving them (and everyone
else) the power to make their own choices. Perhaps what disadvantaged people want
most is better jobs. Nothing in the theory presented here indicates that people who
want better jobs should be denied them. What independantarian theory demands is that
people who do not think the jobs on offer are good enough should not be forced to
accept them anyway. The jobs society offers to individuals are not good enough unless the individuals we ask to take those jobs say so. Only a society that guarantees unconditional access to the resources people need to live a decent life gives every individual the power to decide when, whether, and under what conditions he or she will participate in social projects with others.

I have tried to portray respect for independence as the minimum level of decency that all individuals deserve—no matter how different their perspective might be from ours. It might not be all that we can and should do for everyone, but we are, so far, very short of doing even this much. Most societies attempt to help the poor in one way or another, but even the most generous social support systems tend to attach their aid to paternalistic and sometimes punitive conditions. Disadvantaged people live in many difference circumstances. They have many different perspectives. None of us understands all of everyone else’s circumstances and perspectives. Therefore, we are wrong to ask the disadvantage to prove that they are worthy of access to the resources they need to reach a basic level of functioning. We should put the burden of proof on ourselves if we want to convict someone of being unworthy of basic need. Self-restraint on the part of the people making the rules is especially warranted when the type of proof we ask for tends to be extremely self-serving—like asking them to serve our project or prove they cannot. If we want people to cooperate, we should negotiate the terms of cooperation under conditions in which all are free. We have no moral basis to force anyone into the position in which more powerful people are able to dictate the terms of cooperation.

If we care about others, we need to care about them unconditionally. I do not accept that a society somehow fosters greater caring for each other if it forces disadvantaged people to participate in the social project before it allows them to meet
their own basic needs. A society that sets up its basic structure so that everyone is able to meet their basic needs unconditionally displays more caring than a society that forces anyone who refuses to participate into a position in which they are unable to meet their most basic needs.

When I read history I see one injustice, aside from murder, being committed over and over again from the rise of the first chiefdoms to the present day. People take some form of advantage over others and force the disadvantaged to serve them. It does not matter if the advantage is based on race, class, gender, or anything else. Thinking of all the unjust states in history, you take away the elite’s power to force the disadvantaged to serve (or to deny them their ability to meet their needs on their own), and you take away their ability to commit almost all of their injustices.

Given this long history of injustice against the propertyless and the disadvantaged by the people who dominate resources, it is surprising to me how many political theorists, left and right, believe that the power to say no is too much power for disadvantaged individuals to have. Certainly we can agree that the workers who built the pyramids should have had the power to say no to serving the Pharaoh. Alexander’s conscripts, Roman slaves, medieval serfs, Aztec peasants, ancient Chinese harem members, early American slaves, native peoples displaced by colonialism, Victorian proletarians, Soviet citizens all should have had the power to refuse the things the privileged people of their societies force them to do. Yet rather than freeing the people from force, many political philosophers today are focused on perfecting the conditions under which a forced, lifetime work obligation supposedly becomes allowable. We need to realize that advantage people have spent too much time throughout history forcing disadvantaged people to serve them, and we need to deny that power to anyone. Without this kind of restraint on the powers of advantaged
people, “libertarians” show insufficient concern with freedom and “egalitarians” show insufficient concern for equality.

I have argued that the basic income guarantee is a good institution to secure the effective component of independence in a modern economy, but what ultimately protects each individual’s independence is each other individual’s support for independence. If people recognize that their brothers and sisters must be independent to be free, they will find some institution to protect independence.


2 And murder is simply an extreme case of denying another person the effective freedom to meet their needs.