

## **The Social Ontology of Freedom**

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The principle of religious toleration is one of the cornerstones of liberalism as it developed in response to the religious wars in Europe. According to this principle religious groups should be free to practice their religions, and to organize themselves and form associations within which they can express their fundamental convictions. Within those associations, they should be free to act according to these convictions almost without limitation. The public domain outside of associations does involve restrictions regarding the role religious and other identities can play. Whereas associations can select the kind of people they want to admit as members, discrimination is prohibited in other contexts. In this way a realm is created in which different identities are equally protected and restrained, while at the same time each identity can be expressed almost without restrictions within the private domain. All this is to ensure that different identities enjoy equal amounts of freedom safeguarded by the state.

This characterization of liberalism reveals that both non-organized groups and organized groups play a central role within the liberal tradition. In this book I explore the roles that groups (should) play within liberalism. I bring recent insights from social ontology to bear on traditional questions concerning political authority and obligation, as well as on the more recent multiculturalist concern that the ideal of a neutral state should be abandoned in order to provide groups with genuine freedom. The motto that guides me in these explorations is “*No individual freedom without collective freedom*”. I am primarily concerned with freedom as non-interference, and distinguish between two kinds of collective freedom: the freedom of collective agents such as firms, associations, and political governing agencies including the state (corporate freedom), and the freedom of non-organized groups (group freedom). I defend *non-reductivism* regarding corporate freedom and *eliminativism* with respect to group freedom. These views play a central role in the liberal perspective that I develop on society.

### **Non-Reductivism about Corporate Freedom**

A collective agent is a collection of individuals that can perform actions in its own right. The individuals involved in such an agent have collectively accepted a collective decision mechanism on which the agent relies in order to form joint intentions to perform joint actions. Collective agents develop their own characteristic practices of decision-making. Against this background of this conception, I ask whether the freedom of collective agents can be reduced to the freedoms of their members.

I argue that corporate freedom can come apart from individual freedom, for instance, because certain constraints apply only to individual agents or only to corporate agents. The same holds for corporate and individual power. I use this insight to give substance to a premise that is important in contractarian arguments for the state: corporate powers cannot be reduced to individual powers (*non-reductivism*). So states and other political governing agencies are needed in order to provide people with security and individual freedom.

### **Eliminativism about Group Freedom**

Two kinds of non-organized groups can be distinguished in which identity plays a central role. People often take some feature to be constitutive of their identity, and ascribe significance to the fact that they share this identity with others. These are self-ascriptive or inscriptive groups, which encompass religious and ethnic groups. Other groups are identified from the outside. Non-members ascribe certain features to people within a particular category, develop some kind of stereotype, and treat them in a different way than they treat others. These are ascriptive groups. Women and gay people might be cases in point. I ask whether these are the groups a liberal should focus on insofar as identity is concerned, and whether it makes sense to talk about group freedom in this context.

The first thing to note is that, if group freedoms exist, they must be a kind of individual freedom (*reductivism*). After all, in contrast to collective agents, groups are not agents in their own right. I go on to argue that, insofar as a liberal might think to be concerned with group freedom, it is not the freedom of just any inscriptive or ascriptive group. The group of people who regard wearing hats as constitutive of their identity is not entitled to any special treatment. Furthermore, we do not countenance the freedom of certain illiberal groups, such as that of child molesters. This reveals that identity as such does not entail a special concern for the relevant groups. Finally, identity can matter in relation to individuals just as with respect to groups. Also a solitary atheist has to be protected against discrimination.

The upshot is that there is no adequate descriptive category that suits the normative purposes of the liberal insofar as she is concerned with identities. Thus we lack a descriptive criterion for distinguishing between group freedoms and ordinary individual freedoms. I argue that it is safe to conclude that there is no such thing as group freedom (*eliminativism*). The normative judgments we make in relation to groups do support the conclusion that a fair distribution of individual freedoms requires some group-differentiated rights.