

Book Review: Stein Ringen, *What Democracy Is For: On Freedom and Moral Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 319 pages.

## Democratizing Freedom

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With an impressive range of erudition, Stein Ringen finds contemporary incarnations of democracy to be lacking in their ability to provide citizens with an appropriate measure of “democratic quality,” and offers a series of provocative reflections on how democracy might be improved. To be sure, the issue of what qualifies as “quality democracy” remains hotly contested. For Ringen, “a polity is democratic if its citizens hold ultimate control over collective decisions in a securely institutionalized manner” (p. 25). Of particular concern to Ringen is that established democracies such as the United States and Australia do not provide sufficient “security of freedom,” which, he contends, is at the core of democracy. Simply put, Ringen argues that democracy is for citizens—specifically, it is for their freedom (p. 31).

Like the concept of democracy itself, freedom is what W. B. Gallie referred to as an “essentially contested” concept. To shore up the ambiguity the term invites, Ringen draws upon Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction between positive and negative freedom to make clear that his articulation of freedom is not simply freedom *from* external impositions on one’s desires. Such negative freedom is not merely “destructive to the individual who pursues it,” but it also wreaks havoc on the political, cultural, and environmental landscapes upon which it is pursued (p. 6). Out of a desire for a more robust instantiation of positive freedom—what he terms *real* freedom—Ringen argues for the freedom to live “a good life.” For this, free people need the material resources to make their freedom meaningful (p. 184). That is, it is not sufficient to have the abstract right to choose what kind of life to lead when one lacks the minimum standard of living required to afford any of the options such choice provides.

With this necessity in mind, Ringen contends that democracy should be extended to the economic realm and ought not remain disengaged from the material needs of the polity’s individual citizens. Hence, he measures democratic quality using an expansive breadth of data on the capacity of nominally democratic countries to eradicate poverty, provide health care,

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protect citizens from the political use of economic power, and instill confidence in their respective citizens. Decrying our era as one in which poverty is deemed acceptable and normal, Ringen aspires to a democratic culture in which poverty is viewed as antithetical to the democratic project itself. Unsurprisingly, Scandinavian countries scored better than the United States on this empirical measure, but Ringen's goal is broader than to document income inequality and compare the levels of generosity in respective welfare states. Setting his sights higher, he writes, "It is democratic culture as much as democratic politics that I am in search of" (p. 6).

As the above would suggest, Ringen's project is an ambitious combination of positive and normative claims about the existing and possible shape and moral content of democratic freedom. Chapters one through three address the mechanics of democratic politics, while chapters four through six take up how citizens understand and practice citizenship in democratic contexts. Chapter one asks the question, "How good are the good democracies?" and ultimately finds that, in the minds of the citizens, they are not that good at all (p. 41). Ringen prefers to compare and measure democracies not by "how democratic they are" but on "what they do," since citizens "in the main experience democracy in delivery" (p. 41).

Chapter two poses the question of whether economic democracy is available. Ringen reframes the conception of economic democracy such that it is not simply an embrace of redistribution which promises perfect economic equality. Rather, his vision entails a series of measures intended to guard against the coercive incursions of economic power into political power. Included among these are progressive income taxation and antipoverty policies, but also a need for the middle class to exercise political power in a manner that shifts control of welfare from muscular bureaucracies into the domain of "ordinary people" (p. 70). The burden falls on the middle class to give a bit more to those lower on the economic ladder, while also strategically disempowering the rich without assuming costly "moral capital" by "nationalizing the income or property in question and without removing the economic resources from market use" (p. 71). Ringen concedes that this will require a level of awareness and political will that is entirely contingent on those in the middle class overcoming longstanding fears.

In chapter three, Ringen makes a case for viewing the welfare state as a democratic necessity that need not come at the expense of economic efficiency. He cites northern-European social democracies as examples of what is possible in this regard. The modern welfare state should be universal and leave no one exposed to destitution, but there can be significant variation among the forms it takes, as long as poverty is eliminated. Ringen contends that, with the change in demographics, the perception of intergenerational fairness has shifted with respect to the welfare state. Altering the perception of unfairness will require a change in the narrative where one generation feels shortchanged by another, as well as substantive reforms that include the initiation of programs which help

laborers transition from welfare to work (pp. 80-84).

The sensibility at play here coheres with that of chapter four on the eradication of poverty as a companion project of freedom. As Ringen puts it: “There is more to freedom than poverty or not, and freedom from poverty does not on its own make one’s life free. But it removes the bottom barrier in material resources that makes it impossible to have a life that can start to be free. It is this lack of elementary freedom that is at the heart of the moral problem of poverty” (p.125).

In chapter five we see that the press upon material resources and time has consequences for the family—especially the number of children families can have (p. 163). Although I cannot treat Ringen’s analysis of the family in sufficient length here, he finds that people desire more children than they have and he further contends that the social and economic productivity of the family are tied to the future of democracy itself (p. 183).

In chapter six Ringen extends his argument on “real” freedom, arguing that it requires not only negative liberty and material resources but also the moral clarity to navigate the opportunities and the corresponding responsibilities that freedom confers. As he puts it, “This understanding of freedom contains, inside the definition, wisdom, restraint and self-control—what I call *reason*” (p. 6). Referencing Aristotle, St. Paul, Berlin, and Joseph Raz (among others), Ringen offers a vigorous defense of real freedom as much more than simply doing what one likes. Invoking Aristotle, he reminds readers that such unbridled restraint places one in the position of being a slave to desires. The upshot is that real freedom requires discipline—not least, the discipline of critical self-inquiry. “Freedom is valuable because it makes it relevant to reflect on how to live” (p. 195). The alternative is a psychic condition in which we are enslaved by our wants.

I think it is fruitful to treat the inability to be in control as a kind of dictatorship, at least under certain conditions. A political dictatorship removes from you the ability to act freely. A psychological dictatorship removes from you the ability to decide freely why to act. That is real unfreedom. If forces take hold of your mind and drive you to a life that is not of your own choosing, you are not free (p. 197).

For Ringen, the choice of what force to obey is critical, as are the capacities to do so. “If you do not get a grip on what to obey, you are obeying something that, whatever it is, is not your own will” (p. 200). Liberty is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for freedom—and it is the latter that is worthy of our aspiration. For this, we must “mobilize self-control and make ourselves masters over our wants” (p. 203). In so doing, we exercise a self-restraint that makes it less likely that restraint will be imposed on us. Lack of self-restraint endangers “free life” as well as community because it “discourages decency,

cooperation and trust” (p. 203).

Ringen’s account of restraint is grounded in values and norms, which opens the question of how one knows what, exactly, is being obeyed when one takes herself to be acting reasonably. While the nuance of his response resists concise reduction, at its core is a notion of belief and faith in what one knows.

I must have faith in what I know. I call that *faith*. There is something intangible about values and norms. When a value is established as a value in your mind, it has some force for you that cannot be fully pinned down. You know it to express what is good, right or true. You *know* that you should live by it. You *know* that others, too, should share that value and live by it. Where does awareness come from? The answer is that it is learned... . What does faith do? Faith infuses beliefs with power (p. 209).

Ringen offers readers an account of what he calls evidence-based faith, or reasoned faith, that he claims has kinship with what Habermas terms deliberative rationality (p. 212). In short, liberal freedom is born of an estrangement from others, while real freedom grows from the ways people are connected.

Both in its form and content, a range of readers will likely find much to affirm in *What Democracy Is For*. Ringen brings together descriptive and normative renderings of democracy, while bending his ear to scholarly insights, ancient, modern, and contemporary. This allows the book to largely sidestep the familiar critique that the author simply curses the darkness into which democracy has fallen without lighting any candles for future democratization. Indeed, the thoughtful trajectory of Ringen’s vision of democracy, and the ecumenical scholarly sensibility with which he advances it, are to be applauded. The comparative analysis provides a sobering portrait of present democracies, while the moral underpinnings of the “real” freedom Ringen desires provides no small amount of grist for the mill of democratic debate around the entwined paradoxes of democracy and freedom. That the book provides political thinkers across disciplines an occasion to have this discussion is, in my view, among its strongest contributions.

In this spirit, Ringen offers the following invitation to which I respond below:

Learned exchange on freedom is not an exercise in pure theory, it is a mesh of philosophical truth and strategic expediency. It is about defending something those of us who care about want others to care about or at least respect. What we say freedom is should be both what we believe to be true and what we think will work. That muddies the waters—read

Berlin and see how—but it is in those waters we swim. There is no point in talking to one’s times about freedom if what one says is not believable in those times (p. 202).

It would be tempting to answer this generous enjoinder by retreading the familiar trails of those who measure the distance between the Scandinavian and North American varieties of democracy and capitalism. Perhaps equally alluring is the temptation to cite the potential ways in which the politics and histories of less generous welfare states might make Ringen’s articulation of “real freedom” seem too utopian to be believable in “our” time. Moreover, the notion of a singular time itself presumes that the varieties of capitalism do not render us living in differently “democratic” times—depending on where one falls on the neoliberal economic food chain.

My sense, however, is that Ringen is asking us to penetrate even deeper fathoms, where we find questions of agency, autonomy, and the limits of self-determination. Where Ringen speaks of belief, I was reminded of Wittgenstein’s quip that if there were a verb signifying “to believe falsely,” it could not be translated into the first person. In other words, it makes no sense to say “I believe falsely” or “I believe in an illusion,” since such acknowledgement causes the concept of illusion to self-destruct. Thus it is always someone else who believes falsely or whose desires are under the spell of false consciousness; or perhaps a prior version of myself when—to recall a hymn—“I once was lost, but now I am found.” Ringen cites St. Paul, who attributes his own experience of wayward desire to sin. “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me” (Romans 7:15-16, quoted in Ringen, p. 184).

A slightly more Puritan skepticism would hold that one could never quite be sure whether s/he is doing God’s will or the will of the devil. To put the point in more secular terms, we might inquire whether Ringen’s notion of reasoned belief is enough to insure his subject against being drawn into the orbit of desires that would masquerade as reasonable, when, in fact, they might well have been manufactured and policed by the power relationships that inhabit the very norms which one would draw upon to live a life in common with others. A variety of forces might be implicated in the deliberative rationality that one would use to interrogate desires. This, in turn, could leave subjects in a place where (as Tocqueville worried) we *think* we are free, even when our anemic practices of freedom suggest otherwise.

Interestingly, Ringen cites the Stoics on the need to escape enslavement to one’s desire (p. 198). Yet, one can read the Stoic philosopher Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* as embracing a kind of psychological freedom that is liberated from the desire for embodied freedom. One could attribute Epictetus’s argument to the fact that he was, in reality, a slave. In other words, those who think that freedom is a practice might worry about the entailed risk of slipping into theoretical visions of freedom that inadvertently authorize various kinds

of unfreedom in order to make a virtue out of a political necessity.

From a different angle, to accept the difficult wager of pairing discipline with freedom is to grapple with the tensions in Rousseau's social contract, in which individual liberty is exchanged for collective political power in order to achieve individual freedom. Hence, a great deal of the normative appeal of democracy comes from the notion that it is only through democracy that we can be free, since it is only in a democracy that we can be the authors of the forces that govern our lives. As Ringen is well aware, part of the trouble is that citizens of contemporary democracies do not experience freedom with such elegance.

While scholars have long debated what Rousseau meant by "forcing someone to be free," the notion of mastery over desire presumes sovereignty over the self—a narrative that can be difficult to sustain. This difficulty holds in the context of basic human vulnerabilities that come with inhabiting a mortal body (not of our choosing) that hungers, ages, and comes prewired with an emotional life that is susceptible to attachments to those who pass on but nevertheless remain objects of desire—even in spite of the selves that might well prefer to relinquish their attachments to them. With so many forces plainly beyond our control, at what point does the idiom of freedom begin to appear misplaced or overwrought? More pointedly, to what extent does our political imagination of freedom problematically suppose a mastery over desire, in concert with freedom from the past? What does this mean for democracy, given that we are creatures endowed with memory and who live within a condition in which we often do not know what we desire until we experience it by practicing freedom?

Of course, to engage Ringen's very thoughtful analysis on these grounds presupposes a demos that desires political freedom and does not merely lust after free market material comforts—or "bread," as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor put it. What happens when modern subjects, who seem all too willing to exchange freedom for the faux trappings of security and luxury, find themselves within political institutions that presume a desire for "real" freedom?

In his essay "The Power of the Powerless," Vaclav Havel offered a stern warning that the craving for material comfort can come into tension with the desire for democratic freedom. At bottom, Havel theorized a subject torn between conflicting desires, and therefore much in need of exposure to local political practices of freedom as an enabling vehicle of democratization. That is, there is a sense in which the choice to exercise freedom or not broadens or constrains the spaces of freedom for others who witness it. Looking forward, one can only hope the grass-roots practices of local democracy that Ringen affirms in his conclusion will testify to the problematic exclusions and unfreedom that have shadowed and enabled the freedom of democratic citizens since ancient Athens.