



Jérôme Ballet, Damien Bazin, Jean-Luc Dubois, and François-Régis Mahieu, *Freedom, Responsibility and Economics of the Person*

Freedom, Responsibility and Economics of the Person by Ballet, Jérôme; Bazin, Damien; Dubois, Jean-Luc; Mahieu, François-Régis

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BOOK REVIEWS

Ballet, Jérôme; Bazin, Damien; Dubois, Jean-Luc; and Mahieu, François-Régis. *Freedom, Responsibility and Economics of the Person*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp. 171. \$155.00 (cloth).

How to understand the concept of the person in economics? This is the leading question of *Freedom, Responsibility and Economics of the Person*, issued in Routledge's *Frontiers of Political Economy* series. In this book Jérôme Ballet and his coauthors, four economists from different French universities, engage in a philosophical discussion of the foundations of economics. The central claim of the book is that economics needs to be conducted on the basis of a person-centered philosophy, based on the French phenomenological tradition. Throughout the book, this approach is compared to the liberal tradition in political philosophy in general and the capability approach in particular. Both are criticized for their narrow understanding of the person and his freedom. Ballet et al. use the phenomenological tradition to argue for an enriched conception of the person and then use this conception as a basis for investigating the behavior of persons in economic settings. This setup already indicates that Ballet et al. have not set themselves an easy task. First they have to engage in intraphilosophical debates between the analytical and continental tradition, to show how the capability approach neglects certain phenomenological insights. Then they have to make the resulting philosophical view fruitful for economic research.

The first four chapters are devoted to the philosophical part of this endeavor. After an introductory chapter, chapter 2 discusses the alleged shortcomings of the capability approach. Ballet et al. start with an overview of the literature on different conceptions of freedom in analytical political philosophy and then focus on the capability approach as representative for the liberal tradition. In the capability approach, freedom is conceptualized as consisting of a set of opportunities. This concept of freedom is then used for normative purposes, to underlie claims of right and justice as well as concrete development policies (9–20). Ballet et al. raise two interrelated objections to the capability approach. The first is that the capability approach, like all liberal approaches, “conceive an individual who is profoundly a-social” (21). It neglects the social context in which people act. The second objection is that the liberal approach to freedom “fails to stipulate how freedom is to be used” (21). Liberating the individual by giving him a set of opportunities is not enough, for he has to exercise this freedom in a social context, and here he can act in “either a benevolent or a malevolent manner” (23).

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As an alternative to this asocial and meaningless concept of freedom, chapter 3 proposes to reconceptualize freedom in terms of responsibility. Here the authors argue that the capability approach, like all liberal approaches, sees responsibility as the outcome of free, intentional actions. Freedom of individuals leads to actions, these actions have consequences, and free individuals are responsible for these consequences. There are two problems to this causal view of responsibility, which the authors present in a discussion of Dworkinian luck egalitarianism. One is that the origin of one's actions or preferences seems somehow always to be determined by outside factors, so that attributions of responsibility would become nearly impossible (31–33). The other objection is that monitoring what is under one's control would require a totalitarian state (33–35).

These objections lead Ballet et al. to reverse the order of explanation. With a nod to Strawson and to Sartre, they propose to define agents not through their capacity to make free choices but through their "capacity for responsibility" (36). Human beings are by definition to be understood as moral, responsible beings. Social ascriptions of responsibility come before ascriptions of capacities to make free choices. The following quote conveys the essence: "The agent cannot reject his/her responsibility on the pretext of irrationality. The capacity of agents to make a rational choice does not affect their responsibility because, by their very nature, they are responsible agents. If the insane are not held responsible, this is not due to their lack of rationality; it is because, quite simply, they cannot think of themselves as being in the world as agents. In the sense of an ascription, responsibility cannot be attributed to them" (40).

In chapter 4, this concept of the responsible person is worked out by drawing on the so-called personalist movement in early twentieth-century French philosophy. This movement was given impetus by Charles Mounier, lost traction in the mid-twentieth century, and was then revived (in Ballet et al.'s reconstruction) by Paul Ricoeur. The philosophical core of Mounier's thought is a distinction between internal and external freedom, where the first is presented as a spiritual notion and the latter as a material notion (49–50). A person realizes his inner freedom by acting in the world, creating his own personal identity, committing himself to projects and other persons ('belonging'), affirming values he finds out there, and taking responsibility for his actions. Through a series of phenomenological reflections on the person in the world, the authors aim to show that personalism brings us a balanced view in which the pregiven social environment and the unique individual with his own inner core are both given their due. Finally, the internal/external freedom distinction is then used to restate their earlier criticism of the capability approach. This approach, the authors argue, only focuses on external freedom but neglects the dimension of internal freedom. This "reveals a narrow idea of the conception of the individual with functional freedom, whose notion of internal freedoms has been eliminated" (57).

Chapters 5–9 shift the discussion to economics. In these chapters the authors aim to show that their conception of the person can be fruitfully applied to study the economic behavior of persons.

Chapter 5 discusses the 'methodology of person-centered economics'. Under this heading Ballet et al. do not present a rigorous mathematical methodology but rather a series of ethical reflections on the basis of economics. Their first concern is to reject the utilitarian bent of modern economics. They disap-

provingly describe utilitarianism as a doctrine that “makes individuals homogenous by defining them as endowed with utility. Such an approach finally denies the person’s very existence” (66). They go on to define their own position as a form of ‘contextualism’, by which they mean the thesis that individuals can only be understood within their context. They take pains to distinguish this from moral relativism, by emphasizing that “the universality of the responsible nature of the person cannot be avoided” (73). Still, they emphasize that to understand individual behavior persons must be situated in their context. This long philosophical discussion is concluded by a surprising move (given their aversion to abstract theorizing of the person) to a conventional economic model in which each responsible person is represented as having a bundle of rights and duties and said to “maximize the social yield of his obligations” (77).

This abstract discussion is illuminated in chapter 6, in which the authors provide three different illustrations of the kind of person-centered economics they have in mind. This chapter is the most down to earth of the book, and gives the best sense of where Ballet et al. want to take their project. For here they use material from the area of development economics, their home base, to show that conventional economic models which neglect the fact that individuals have socially ascribed rights and duties cannot properly explain their behavior with respect to spending, consuming, lending money, and other activities. For example, they argue that lenders in poor rural areas offer credit on lower interest rates than would be economically rational on standard models, because of the social proximity they have to their borrowers (88–90). Without understanding the web of social duties in which people are immersed, their economic behavior becomes irrational. According to Ballet et al. the person-centered perspective can offer such an explanation.

In chapters 7 and 8, the project of person-centered economics is carried further by reflections on the importance of understanding the vulnerability of persons (e.g., in lifeboat situations and concentration camps) and their fallibility and fragility. All these terms are given a phenomenological description in terms of being necessary characteristics of responsible persons. In general there is much less concern with economic analysis in these chapters, although economic examples are used occasionally. Chapter 9 concludes by presenting a tentative case for an institutional responsibility to honor a ‘social precautionary principle’.

It is difficult to evaluate a book that aims to connect themes and concepts from analytical to continental philosophy and economics (as well as making occasional use of psychological, sociological, and other studies). In terms of a disciplinary grasp of analytical philosophy, I remained unconvinced at (too) many points.

To start with, the authors attack a caricature of the liberal tradition. The claim that liberalism rests on an asocial conception of the individual has been made in many variants before (MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor, etc.), and many others have given sophisticated responses to these worries (Raz, Kymlicka, Miller, etc.). Ballet et al. completely ignore these long-standing discussions within analytical philosophy. Similarly, the claim that liberal egalitarian theories of justice do not take sufficient note of the way individuals use their freedom has been extensively discussed. Apart from the fact that liberal theories always incorporate some sort of harm principle to prohibit ‘evil’ actions, the authors seem to miss the more

general point that liberal theories are self-consciously political theories. They only aim at delineating justified state interferences in individual lives. Thus, liberal theories can remain agnostic about existentialist or phenomenological criticisms of individual's use of their freedom as long as this use is politically allowed under liberal criteria. One may not be convinced by this political/nonpolitical distinction in liberal theories of freedom, but at least one then has to delve into this discussion and show why.

Equally, the authors miss the large philosophical literature on the capability approach. It is somewhat strange that when they defend their central point about the failure of the liberal tradition to deal with individual responsibility in a satisfactory manner, they only target luck egalitarianism. Elizabeth Anderson famously launched a roughly similar criticism of luck egalitarianism and used this to introduce her own version of the capability approach. If any theory should be on their side in the responsibility debate, then, it should be Anderson's version of the capability approach. Unfortunately, they do not consider her work, nor do they reflect on Joe Wolff and Avner De-Shalit's sophisticated reintroduction of responsibility considerations into the capability approach and much other work. The authors also miss the literature on social or collective capabilities (e.g., by Séverine Deneulin) which explores the limits of the individualism in this approach. Thus, Ballet et al.'s criticism is unlikely to impress readers who are familiar with the philosophical debate on the capability approach.

When we turn to the economic chapters, questions arise as well. Perhaps the main point that remains puzzling is why so much elaborate philosophical discussion was necessary to introduce the rather simple point that economic actors should be understood in their context and are always constrained in their behavior by socially imposed duties. Moreover, much of the 'thickness' of the individual personality as it emerges from the phenomenological passages necessarily has to take a backseat when it comes to economic explanation, which generalizes over the concrete individual, so that one wonders how much work the philosophical chapters can really do in economic analyses. Finally, one also wonders whether the same lessons for economics could have arisen on the basis of other philosophical traditions (e.g., the literature following Strawson). In the end, Ballet et al. never explicitly argue that their use of the phenomenological tradition is the best way to arrive at the picture of a responsible person endowed with rights and constrained by duties. Given their interdisciplinary approach, a little more reflection on which approaches are used and why would have been helpful to orient the reader.

There is also a question of how to deal with the fact/value dichotomy that gets insufficient attention. The economic part of the book opens with the reproach that the capability approach "is rooted in opportunities but ignores responsibilities, i.e. the constraints that the responsible person has to cope with" (61–62). This seems to be completely out of place. Ballet et al. do not seem to realize that the capability approach (at least in Amartya Sen's representation) is a self-consciously modest approach, which merely gives a metric for evaluating social states. Thus it is an essentially normative approach, which can be applied in welfare economics, theories of justice, or measurements of quality of life. As a normative approach, it does recognize rights and duties: individuals get rights to capabilities (both in Nussbaum's and in Sen's version of the approach), and

other individuals have duties to honor these rights. What the metric itself cannot and does not aspire to do, however, is to give a full explanatory account of human behavior. The authors' complaint that the capability approach ignores constraints misses its target. The capability approach can very well be compatible with different models that do recognize that people face constraints in realizing human functionings.

Finally, the economic part of the book does not discuss other work in economics that acknowledges that individuals can be constrained by moral norms and duties. They only pitch their conclusions against orthodox theories that do not take these into account. However, the social embeddedness of individuals is surely not Ballet et al.'s discovery, not even in economics. Nonetheless, the book sometimes makes it seem as if it is. It would have been very helpful, for example, if they would have engaged with the entire branch of economics that has made it its trademark to think about norms and institutions: institutional economics (Douglas North, Oliver Williamson, and others). Scientific progress works not only by comparing one's theories with that of one's opponents but also by showing how one's views are novel compared to close fellow travelers. The absence of any discussion of institutional economics seems, given the case Ballet et al. want to push, to present an important omission in this book.

In the end, one wonders what this book would have looked like if it were cowritten not by four development economists but, for example, by one development economist, one institutional economist, one analytical philosopher, and one continental philosopher. It is not of much use to intervene in discussions within fields to which one has only had occasional exposure. I share the authors' conviction that the effort to straddle boundaries and create multidisciplinary perspectives is an important one. However, such an effort requires strong disciplinary expertise in each of the fields that one wants to connect to.

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Brighouse, Harry, and Swift, Adam. *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. 240. \$35.00 (cloth).

The collaborative work of Adam Swift and Harry Brighouse has for several years been one of the driving forces in contemporary debates on the ethics of families. This book presents the most detailed and expansive exposition of a view that will already be familiar to many readers from their several coauthored papers. The full-length version is, as expected, a detailed and illuminating discussion of many important aspects of the familial relationship. The book also engages with practical policy questions to an extent that is uncommon in contemporary political philosophy. Indeed, the text is a paradigmatic example of how to write in a way which is accessible to the layperson and policy expert but is also satisfying to discipline specialists.