

Abstract for the General Public

Suppose that Person X is Person Y's slave. Y can, if they wish, command and prohibit X from doing various things. Moreover, a complex institutional structure exists to ensure that X will face punishment if they do not obey Y, and that Y can exercise their power over X with impunity. Suppose further, however, that Y chooses not to exercise this power. Perhaps Y is generally kindly and reluctant to issue commands; perhaps they are opposed to slavery and wish to protest the existence of the institutional structure that protects their power and position; or perhaps they are simply too lazy or uninterested to make and enforce any directives to X. Whatever the reason, Y never actually interferes with X's plans and actions, despite the fact that they have the power to do so. Although Y never actually interferes with X, X's position with respect to Y nevertheless seems importantly objectionable. The major goal of this research project is to work out precisely why that is, and to explore the institutional and public policy-related implications that follow.

Political and social philosophers refer to X's situation with respect to Y as *domination*. Though Y largely leaves X to their own devices, Y's power over X means that they nevertheless *dominate* X. Domination has long been a significant category in social thought, and archetypal social relations of oppression and injustice have long been understood in terms of domination. Moreover, the fact of domination is thought to play an important part in our judgment of the oppressive and unjust character of social institutions such as feudalism, slavery, white supremacy, patriarchy, and so on. However, despite this apparently broad agreement that the concept of domination is central to understanding injustice and oppression, there is far less agreement about the precise nature of domination and the particular character of the moral wrong that it constitutes. Though we might all be able to see *that* domination is bad, it is much harder to see both *why* it is bad and *when* it is occurring.

In contemporary political philosophy, there are two major competing approaches to understanding domination's moral status. On the one hand, some philosophers (known as neo-republicans) argue that domination can be understood as offensive to the value of *freedom*. When we are dominated, we are under the power of another (as X is under the power of Y in the example above) and somebody who lives under the power of another is not truly free. On the other hand, another group of philosophers (known as relational egalitarians) argue that domination should be understood as offensive to the value of *equality*. When we are dominated, there is someone who controls us (as Y controls C in the example above) and those who control others cannot stand to those others as equals—they relate to them as superior to inferior, rather than on terms of equality.

This research project will provide a systematic analysis, comparison, and evaluation of these two alternative accounts of domination's moral status. The first major task will be to investigate whether the two accounts are compatible, and if not whether one has benefits that the other lacks. The second task will be to ask what follows from this analysis with respect to how opposition to domination relates to other important concepts in political philosophy, such as independence and solidarity. And the third task will be to ask what follows from these analyses with respect to various important contemporary debates about public policy. Domination has long been thought to be a particularly fruitful concept when thinking about the philosophical foundations of arguments in favour of various policy proposals. For example, with respect to universal basic income, it is often argued that a UBI (and other forms of universal welfare provision) would protect participants in labour markets from the domination they would otherwise face, by increasing their effective power to decline unfavourable employment contracts. Similarly, recent calls for increased workplace democracy have been motivated in part by the thought that such measures can protect employees from domination at the hands of their employers; and parallel arguments have been produced for broader forms of economic democracy, such as community wealth building initiatives, which all aim at preventing some from living under the power of others in their economic lives.

The research project would seek to investigate and assess the strength of these arguments, by investigating their philosophical foundations—carefully analyzing and assessing the weight of different theories of wrongful domination and examining the implications of that analysis for public policy. Through a series of academic publications, popular publications in political magazines, and the production of a website and podcast to explain the most significant parts of the research in a publicly accessible form, the project will put the resources of the cutting edge of political philosophy to the service of making concrete contributions to the core policy debates that could determine the shape of our economy in the coming decades.