



**Freedom and Culture in Western Society.**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### Political Theory

**Freedom and Culture in Western Society.** By Hans Blokland. New York: Routledge, 1997. 319p. \$74.95.

Brent L. Pickett, *Chadron State College*

Hans Blokland revisits the debate between positive and negative freedom. He seeks to defend a chastened version of positive freedom, one which emphasizes personal autonomy. While he defends the worth of a large scope for negative freedom, Blokland ultimately believes that a positive or exercise-concept of freedom can be made largely compatible with negative liberty. Furthermore, he argues that through an active arts and culture policy the state has a significant role to play in the promotion of autonomy.

Blokland displays a strong grasp of the voluminous literature on the debate over freedom, especially the debate in the Anglo-American tradition. It seems as if virtually no Anglo-American theorist writing about freedom in the last 30 years has escaped his attention (though remarkably enough there is no mention of Richard Flathman's *The Philosophy and Politics of Freedom* [1987]). Indeed, at times his focus is too much upon contemporary works; the only pre-twentieth century thinker to make a real appearance in this work is J. S. Mill. Blokland focuses much of his attention upon Isaiah Berlin, devoting a chapter to a careful explication and criticism of Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" and other writings on freedom. This is appropriate not only because of the preeminence of Berlin's work in this area but also because Blokland's approach closely resembles that of Berlin. Both are ethical pluralists who are willing to admit that at least certain forms of negative and positive freedom are genuinely valuable; they simply disagree about where the tradeoffs actually lie.

Admitting that both negative and positive freedom are real goods opens up what Blokland calls an *emancipation dilemma*, which has two dimensions, one individual and the other social. On the one hand, Blokland favors an active cultural dissemination policy, since he believes this will help develop capacities essential to autonomy, such as the ability to reflect critically upon the society one inhabits. On the other hand, Blokland recognizes that such a policy can be coercive, especially for those adults who lack autonomy and do not see it as a good. Is paternalism toward such individuals justifiable? If contemporary society inculcates undesirable attitudes and modes of life, such as a shallow materialism, then how can society be systematically reorganized to eliminate these tendencies, while still recognizing a large degree of negative freedom? Blokland's goal is to articulate a conception of autonomy which is compelling to a wide range of theorists and "which makes it possible to break out of the dilemma . . . in a manner acceptable to the parties concerned" (p. 6). In his discussions of positive freedom and autonomy, Blokland does much to clarify a rather disparate debate. In effect, he conducts a survey of recent positive freedom theorists, such as Charles Taylor and Benjamin Barber, in order to sort out what is essential to theories of positive freedom. The ideal of autonomy at which Blokland arrives is rather demanding. Autonomy requires "a balanced, integrated personality," along with self-knowledge, will power, some independence of mind, and an "active theoretical rationality" (pp. 81, 82). Yet, because this conception is demanding, it is doubtful whether it will persuade a wide range of theorists, as Blokland uses this conception to defend paternalism, in the hope that a temporary interference in a

person's life may, in the long run, greatly expand her number of meaningful choices.

Blokland also thinks paternalism is "sometimes inevitable . . . in order to break up existing structures of socialization or a prevailing inertia" (p. 157). That is, in the social dimension of the emancipation dilemma Blokland again supports active intervention in order to foster the capacities necessary for autonomy. He realizes this opens him to various charges of recommending coercion, such as Berlin made, yet Blokland contends that "it is undesirable that people, out of fear of the accusation of totalitarian thinking, leave cultural formation as a matter of course to the 'free play of social, in this case economic, forces,' and not to democratically accountable institutions such as government, parliament, political parties, educational institutions and the press" (p. 185). Though one can certainly wonder just how democratically accountable these latter institutions are, there are good reasons for not leaving socialization up to market forces. Since participation in culture often has the effect of opening persons up to alternative ways of living, encouraging critical reflection upon one's society and its norms, and aiding the development of the capacities necessary for autonomy, Blokland argues for a greater social commitment to the arts and culture. Western societies have made the mistake of pursuing only a supply-oriented culture policy; that is, subsidizing theaters, libraries, and so on, in the hope that people will attend. He provides evidence, however, that participation in culture is lacking especially among the poor, and that cultural activity is declining in general among all groups. Thus, Blokland believes that governments in particular need to do more to increase the demand side in their cultural policies; for example, through altering school curriculums to give the arts and culture a greater emphasis, and by subsidizing more amateur art performances.

Because Blokland combines an extensive literature review with his own valuable analysis, this book is of great value to those interested in theories of freedom. Yet, it should have an even wider appeal: The manner in which he connects abstract issues about human nature and the nature of freedom with issues of cultural policy is powerful and well argued. This book has a great number of virtues: a wealth of interesting asides about variation between countries in cultural policies; a discussion of the effects of moving from an oral to a written culture, and now to a visual (electronic) one; and too many other topics to mention. Even though the translation is sometimes awkward, this book deserves a large audience.

**Skepticism, Belief, and the Modern: Maimonides to Nietzsche.** By Aryeh Botwinick. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. 249p. \$39.95.

Fredrick Appel, *Harvard University*

Aryeh Botwinick is nothing if not ambitious. In this provocative and occasionally insightful book he proposes nothing less than a rereading of Western intellectual history as the progressive triumph of skepticism. The general idea is that skepticism, the view that "our theoretical formulations do not necessarily intersect with a reality outside themselves" (p. 18), initially presented itself in an inchoate and unself-conscious form in antiquity and the Middle Ages before gradually emerging in modernity and postmodernity as a more mature (i.e., more self-conscious and self-confident) mode of being in the world.

Although Plato makes a (surprising) cameo appearance as a posterboy for premodern skepticism, Botwinick places the