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Self-Ownership and Freedom: Reasons for Maintaining a Traditional Connection

Abstract: In this paper I present and analyze the classical libertarian thesis according to which there is an intimate connection between humans' right to self-ownership and their freedom, and I provide some reasons for preserving this traditional connection against its egalitarian contesters, represented by Gerald Allan Cohen. The principle states that humans have a right of property over their persons and powers, and any interference with this right is equivalent to a violation of their freedom. This is the reason why an egalitarian thinker like Cohen tries to reject the principle and its connection with freedom in order to legitimate redistribution of property in the benefit of the underprivileged: he argues that the principle itself (and particularly Robert Nozick's version of it) has no special relation with freedom and lacks any real significance for political philosophy. I will reject his argumentation and evidentiate that the traditional connection still stands and the principle is indeed useful. In the last section I will formulate what I believe to be a more robust justification of it and offer some suggestions about the central role it could play in a general explanation of social and political legitimacy and normativity.

Keywords: self-ownership, freedom, right, redistribution, human agency