PhD Research Summary

Provisional Thesis Title: A Theory of Occupational Justice

A theory of occupational justice is a theory that specifies the range of rights and duties citizens ought to have with respect to occupation – in short, it specifies the range of citizens’ occupational rights and duties. A full theory of occupational justice will specify citizens’ occupational rights and duties qua employees, employers, and democratic citizens.¹ In my thesis I restrict my theorising to only citizens’ occupational rights and duties qua employees. I am thus concerned with the following types of questions: Under what conditions should citizens be provided with, or compensated for lacking, opportunities for meaningful work? What form should this compensation take? Under what conditions are citizens under a duty of justice to pursue socially beneficial occupations? Under what conditions is it permissible to conscript citizens to pursue socially beneficial occupations? Though some of these questions have received some academic attention, there has been no systematic treatment of these questions. It is in providing this systematic treatment, through a theory of occupational justice, that my major academic contribution lies.

An adequate theory of occupational justice must specify citizens’ occupational rights and duties in both the ideal world and the real world. The first half of my thesis consists of an examination of the ideal world, and the second half of my thesis consists of an examination of the real world. I stipulate that ideal worlds are characterised by the following two properties: (nearly) full compliance with principles of justice; and the absence of historical injustice.² By contrast, I stipulate that real worlds are characterised by the inverse of those properties: low levels of compliance with the principles of justice, and the presence of historical injustice. The real world is defined such that it resembles our world and, as a result, the conclusions I draw in relation to the real world will have implications for how we should think about occupation here and now. This is a second way in which my thesis will seek to make a contribution.

Each half of my thesis will itself be split into two further halves: one half dealing with occupational rights, and one half dealing with occupational duties. The upshot of this is that my thesis is, in effect, separated into four parts. These four parts correspond to boxes A, B, C, and D in Figure 1.

¹ It should be noted that I believe a citizen can be an employee in the relevant sense even if they are not party to an employment contract. Carers, parents, and volunteers may all qualify as employees in the sense that I am using the term, for example.

The principal advantage of my research design is two-fold. First, by separating my thesis into four parts I am able to bracket off certain issues at certain parts of the investigation, and thus deal only with manageably-sized questions. As an example of this, let us note my investigation in parts C and D is essentially an investigation into how the theory of occupational justice developed in parts A and B needs to be amended in light of certain complexities that arise in the real world.

The second advantage of arranging my thesis in this way is that it allows me to make distinct contributions to four distinct but related literatures. These literatures are those corresponding to parts A, B, C, and D. Let me be more specific about the way in which I intend to contribute to each literature. In part A, I use Ronald Dworkin’s resources egalitarianism – and, in particular, his model of hypothetical insurance – to illuminate citizens’ occupational rights in the ideal world.3 My aim, in a nutshell, is to draw upon the Marxist analysis of the workplace to show that citizens would hypothetically insure against lacking opportunities for meaningful/self-realizing work.4 In this first half of part B I examine – and subsequently reject as implausible – G. A. Cohen’s and John Rawls’ account of citizens occupational duties in ideal worlds.5 In the second half of part B, I then propose an alternative account that walks a middle-path between their two extremes. In parts C and D I examine Daniel Butt’s work on historical injustice:6 in particular, I show that his view must be rejected in favour of a more radical approach which suggests that citizens are liable to have considerable duties imposed on them.

The contents of my thesis will thus look as follows:

1. Introduction
2. A - citizens’ occupational rights in the ideal world
3. B - citizens’ occupational duties in the ideal world
4. Summary of citizens’ occupational rights and duties in the ideal world
5. C - citizens’ occupational rights in the real world
6. D - citizens’ occupational duties in the real world
7. Summary of citizens’ occupational rights and duties in the real world
8. Conclusion

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4 See, for example, Paul Gomberg, How To Make Opportunity Equal (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2007).