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Marginality and the Insignificance of Choice¹

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“Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens.”

– Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, I.ii.2.

Introduction

Adam Smith was a man of his age. Despite the wisdom in describing the principles of moral approbation underlying the science of human nature,² he shared with his contemporaries the belief that marginal people “chose” to depend on the benevolence of others. The picture evoked resembles a Dickensian portrait of the beggars, prostitutes, and barefoot children that populated the streets of Great Britain during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution – those we imagine imploring for a penny, or worse offering their body or labor for meager pay. The same portrait, sadly, is still common among us today. The perception that laziness is the main cause of economic inequality, and therefore of poverty and marginality, is still widespread in Anglo-American culture, and just a bit less so in Europe and the rest of the world.³ But even where poverty is not believed to be caused by moral weakness, there is still an unspoken belief that poverty is a form of weakness that calls for condescension. What is at stake in these attitudes of judgment or condescension is the incapacity to see that poverty, inequality, and marginality are not just a consequence of a given distribution of resources, opportunities, wealth or income, but that they are also deeply affected by the quality

of social relationships, that sense of respect that comes with treating others as equals, or the lack thereof. For, when social relationships are exacerbated by gross inequality, the worst-off are also subjected to hierarchies of power, esteem, and status. The debate on social egalitarian relationships⁴ has rightly insisted on exclusion as a consequence of social inequality, but has overlooked the fact that exclusion is part of a more general and persistent phenomenon of marginality in every social system based on inequalities of wealth and status. While marginality is a proper object of sociological analysis, philosophers have failed to recognize its moral and political value. I am not suggesting that philosophers should be engaged in defining the conditions for the emergence of marginality but that they can help clarify the concept of marginality in ways that do justice to the reality of such a phenomenon. My attempt in this brief note is to contribute to this work of clarification. I will start with a working definition of marginality and clarify what I think is the nexus between marginality and exclusion. I will then move on to elaborate on exclusion as a matter of choice. The main claim is that the concept of marginality, as it is used in the European and American public discourse, relies upon a specific conception of *choice* as a resolute act of the will. However, if we frame marginality in these terms, we miss the crucial point that marginal subjects are indifferent to the language of choice, for they do not attach significance to the very capacity of making a choice.

I characterize marginality as the permanent condition of individuals or groups who do not play any socially recognized productive role in a social system and are therefore excluded from the economy of credibility that regulates social hierarchies. Marginal groups may include ethnic or other minorities cursed with stigmas and prejudice or more fluid communities such as migrants and refugees. Marginal individuals living outside communities may include homeless people,

sex workers, persons affected by mental health issues, the elderly as well as people with disabilities left without supporting structures. Marginality usually affects individuals belonging to more than one single category, whose common condition is their vulnerability and social isolation. The list, of course, is not exhaustive. Classification of groups or individuals as marginal can change over time and place, although certain categories are exposed more than others to social exclusion.

Now, we say that marginal people are *excluded* from relevant social relationships, but what does this mean exactly? In general, exclusion recalls the image of a spatial configuration between center and periphery, or between *in* and *out*. Community marginals (the homeless, the elderly poor, sex-workers) are usually excluded in this spatial sense, sometimes even segregated (for instance, when they are institutionalized). In this sense, community marginals share the same fate as those in exile or as migrants (who literally reside outside a territory).

There is more, however, in the idea of marginality than what the spatial image conveys. Marginalized groups are also excluded in the more specific sense that they are considered not to be part of a cooperative social system. They are excluded from what we may call the economy of esteem⁵ that regulates the attribution of social status in society. Whether such a condition is coerced or chosen to some extent, is a more nuanced aspect of marginality that the spatial image does not capture. Let's explore this.

The Resolute Model

Choices have value when they can affect our prospects of achieving something we value. Realizing a life-plan, accomplishing a task,

whether self-regarding or other-regarding, all involve making choices at different steps.⁶ A common way of conceptualizing existential choices of these sort is as a node in a forking path. This image has both a philosophical and a literary attraction, as it conveys a representation of life as a branching tree of possible worlds, where choices made at each node actualize one of the paths. T. S. Eliot expressed this image in the *Four Quartets*: “What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation. / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present.”

Since these choices are nodes in a branching tree unfolding into the future, they are represented as both ineluctable and irremediable decisions about which path to take. In virtue of this crucial significance, they are conceived as willful deliberations. We may call “resolute” this model of the condition of choice. The resolute model is grounded in a conception of agency as a unity across time, i.e., in the presumption that at each node in the forking path, there is a *self* exercising a power of decision over which path to walk. In the resolute model, life appears as a continuous flow in which agents exercise control over their actions and strive to contain the effects of events that they do not control. Life is thus the temporal dimension in which agency unfolds its deeds. One may think of such a unity along the lines of the Kantian idea of a transcendental unity of the self, or as a deeper psychological fact that preserves the continuity of the self across time. In either case, the model embeds one feature that is relevant to our discussion. This is the idea that the value attached to the capacity of making choices gives value to the choices one makes. It is this deep fact about our agency that gives the agent a sense of self-worth through the practical realization of mundane deeds.

The resolute model gives shape to a liberal conception of the

autonomous person that has the full moral and cognitive powers to realize life-plans in accordance with their will in a cooperative system in which their efforts and achievements are recognized by their peers. This is, for instance, according to John Rawls, the conception of moral personhood in a society where social institutions act according to principles of justice. It is not my intention to criticize this view. I rather suggest considering the model of choice as a standard of evaluation for social inclusion in a liberal-democratic society. If we use this model as a standard, marginals fail as full agents under the most important feature of the model, the value they are able to attach to their choices.

The Insignificance of Choice

In order to address the significance of choice in conditions of marginality, we should note that the resolute model fails to distinguish between valuing choices, for instance, by attaching utility to opportunities, and valuing one's ability to make choices based on those opportunities.⁷

The resolute model holds that one's ability to make choices – having control over one's life plans – confers values on the choices one makes. But, along with this, there is a second dimension of choice: in the ordinary circumstances of socially integrated members, for a person to have the ability to make choices is conducive to realizing, through opportunities, the goals and life plans she values. This view is often associated with the belief that effort contributes to turning opportunities into achievements. Thus, valuing one's choices confers value to one's ability to make choices. It is the mutual reinforcement between choices and ability that provides the ground for attributing moral value to agency. Agents are full members of an economy of

credibility that can claim deserts and hold responsibility for their actions. For marginal subjects, such a system of reinforcement is broken. This can happen for several reasons: deprived of opportunities, choices become less relevant, and marginal subjects lose confidence in their power of making choices that are effective in achieving their goals and promoting their well-being more generally.

As a consequence, also the belief that effort increases the likelihood of achievement loses its grip. While still capable of making choices in a narrow sense of the term, marginal subjects lose their sense of being able to influence their lives, thus becoming indifferent to their ability to make choices. As this attitude toward self-concern becomes more rooted over time, marginal subjects are increasingly more resistant even to policies designed to increase their opportunity set. Once agency no longer carries any value, no real opportunity can hail this loss.

We may call 'the significance of choice' the view that agency is morally valuable. Marginality is the condition in which such a capacity, not just what is chosen, loses significance. Marginality is, in other words, harm to the very capacity for moral agency. An example of the lost significance of choice is what we may call 'bound to fail' attitudes. They consist in the expectation that a life-plan is doomed to fail, thus leading to self-blame when the failure inevitably occurs. Attitudes of this sort manifest themselves in avoiding to engage in any activity whose goal a person expects not to be able to achieve. 'Bound to fail' attitudes are not a psychological condition that falls upon someone, but presuppose voluntariness. A person adopts a 'bound to fail' attitude and does not simply suffer from it. Moreover, 'bound to fail' attitudes are eminently social: they arise from a condition of disadvantage in valuing opportunities required to achieve a planned goal, which lies outside the person's control.

The distinction I have drawn between making a particular choice and valuing one's capacity to make a choice can help to explain the rationale of 'bound to fail' attitudes. An agent who is able to make a choice normally prefers certain options over others in his opportunity set. The agent acts rationally if he satisfies his strongest preference. However, sometimes people are indifferent with regard to the opportunities they have: they become unable to assign value to their opportunities and cannot rank their preferences. This is what happens when expected failure becomes predominant at important nodes in the forking paths of life. In cases of this sort, what they choose, or if they choose at all, does not make any difference to their value system, and from that perspective, it is hard to see why it would be irrational *for them* to choose by tossing a coin. Thus, choices lose significance for them.

If we assume that the characterization I gave of the 'bound to fail' attitudes is correct, at least as a hypothesis, then we realize why 'bound to fail' attitudes may lead marginalization *even* in the presence of progressive policies that try to mitigate inequality of opportunities. Consider, for instance, policies that grant more extensive access to better education through affirmative action or 'no child left behind' programs. These policies often frame the problem as a matter of *access* to opportunities. The idea of many egalitarian theorists in the liberal-democratic tradition is that an educational system promotes fair equality of opportunity, that is – as Rawls put it – “equal prospects of achievement and culture for those similarly motivated and endowed.”⁸ Nevertheless, progressive policies inspired by this ideal of justice can hardly alleviate the expected failure and lack of self-respect suffered by certain minorities and social groups due to the general condition of their social life, be it poverty, prejudice, or other factors.

Since the expectation of failure undermines effort and motivation, even a system of generally trustworthy institutions (that promote fair equality of educational opportunities) falls short of addressing the expectation of failure, because they address the wrong issue: it is not the lack of opportunities for educational goods that matters, but the attitudes towards those goods. Thus, it can happen that even within a democratic education system that, in principle, promotes equality, students from disadvantaged or low-income backgrounds would still misrecognize their conditions of failure as their fault, and in doing so, bash their sense of self-worth.

I have framed this brief analysis as an exercise in the moral psychology of marginality. By moral psychology, I refer to the set of attitudes of regret and resentment, guilt and failure, self-exclusion, and lack of self-respect, that marginal subjects develop in response to how they are treated by social institutions. I do not have the time here to elaborate further on the moral psychology of marginality. I just want to remark that the moral psychology of 'bound to fail' attitudes shows – or can help to show at least – how the self-perception of unworthiness may turn choices into chances. When choices lose their significance, because they do not make a difference in our chances to achieve our goals, the capacity itself of making a choice loses its value.

Conclusion

I have argued that marginality is a condition in which subjects lose their sense of being able to influence their life course through opportunity and effort, thus becoming indifferent to their capacity to make choices. The lost significance of choice contributes to explain two aspects of marginality as a stable feature of hierarchical societies. First is the internalized attitude of disempowerment as unworthiness

that is common in marginalized groups (often as a pathological condition of pervasive depression). Second, the fact that marginal subjects live outside the economy of esteem and credibility of social hierarchies in which responsibility for achievements is the common currency of status attribution.

I want to conclude by coming back to the image of choice as a resolute act of will. A consequence of the attitude that making choices has no significance is that life appears as unstructured, thus lacking that unity the resolute model presupposes for agency. When such a capacity loses its significance, also the capacity of exercising control over one's life is undermined as a consequence. Not only the burden of events falls onto a life in disarray, for their effects on the person cannot be contained anymore, but the confidence itself of giving a direction to one's life by acting purposefully vanishes, leaving behind only the residual power to act out of necessity. By undermining the significance of choice, marginality thus deprives people of the value of their agency as moral persons.

Notes

¹ This contribution is part of a broader collaboration with Manohar Kumar on epistemic injustice and the significance of choice. I wish to thank Marianna Papastephanou and Torill Strand for inviting me to present part of this work to the workshop on 'Philosophies and Pedagogies of Inclusion and Exclusion' at ISSEI 2019, and the audience for a fruitful discussion.

² See Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759] (Penguin Classics, 2010).

³ See, for instance, Pete Dorey, "A Poverty of Imagination: Blaming the Poor for Inequality," *The Political Quarterly* 81 (3) (2010): 333-43; Bruce Stokes, "Is Laziness the Cause of Economic Inequality?" *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/22/is-laziness-the-cause-of-economic-inequality/> (accessed 1 December 2019); Volpato, *Le radici psicologiche dell'ineguaglianza* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2019), 113-22.

⁴ Some crucial contributions to social egalitarianism include: Elizabeth Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics*, 109 (1999): 287-337; Carina Fourie, Fabian Schuppert, and Ivo Wallim-Helmer, eds., *Social Equality. On What It Means to Be Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Martin

O'Neill, "What Should Egalitarians Believe?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 119-56; Samuel, Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31 (1) (2003): 5-39; Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

⁵ See Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit, *The Economy of Esteem. An Essay on Civil and Political Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 2.

⁶ Here I am not referring to choices of trivial substance – for instance, whether one should prefer to wear a blue or a black-tie at a dinner party – but to choices that set people of paths of life: educational choices, looking for a job (or quitting it), following a vocation, having a family, children, and so on.

⁷ Tim Scanlon gave a seminal contribution to this topic in his 1986 Tanner Lectures. See Thomas Scanlon, "The Significance of Choice," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin, vol. 8 (University of Utah Press, 1988): 149-216. For a discussion of the significance of choice for self-respect, see also Eszter Kollar and Daniele Santoro, "Not by Bread Alone: Inequality, Relative Deprivation, and Self-Respect," *Philosophical Topics* 40 (1) (2012): 79-96.

⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 63.