

Freedom and Emancipatory Entrepreneurship

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Emancipatory entrepreneurship (EE) emphasizes the use of entrepreneurial means to dismantle constraints and create change in the entrepreneurs' positions in a given social order, and in the social order itself (Rindova et al., 2009). Such change efforts are motivated by a quest for autonomy and removal of constraints. Therefore, the fundamental focus of EE is on the expansion of human freedom -- for oneself *and* others.¹ As such, EE is concerned not only, and not even primarily, with the acquisition, accumulation, deployment, and growth of resources, but with freedom and its implications for oneself *and* others. Focusing on freedom is more informative than the narrower focus on resources, as it directs attention to the broader conditions that constrain access to resources, and the processes through which such access can be established (Sen, 1985). Furthermore, redirecting attention to freedom and unfreedom in understanding entrepreneurship reduces the focus on access to resources as a function of conformity and fit within established social and economic orders. It orients entrepreneurial action toward change, disruption and creation, generativity and self-expression, and ultimately, the realization of new possibilities (but see Wadhvani and Tucker in this dialogue for discussion of disruption as a threat to a free society).

Turning research attention to the relationship between entrepreneurship and freedom can help us develop better answers and solutions to the questions and challenges of our times. The advent of entrepreneurialism as a neo-liberal market-centric ideology makes research on the relationship between freedom and entrepreneurship both theoretically important and pragmatically urgent. To this end, here I highlight different conceptions of freedom and their implications for deepening our understanding of *agency* and *constraints* in the study and practice of EE.

The study of freedom – primarily in domains of political theory, law, and moral philosophy – has long focused on the distinction between *negative freedom*, understood as the absence of barriers and constraints to pursuing one's purposes, and *positive freedom*, understood as capabilities to take actions to realize one's purposes (Berlin 1969). Negative freedom is associated with the *absence* of barriers or interference from others, whereas positive freedom is associated with *presence* of capabilities, including access to resources and the ability to engage in actions to increase such access. Whereas the two conceptions of freedom are often seen as oppositional, EE has been theorized as encompassing both: *freedom from*, reflected in seeking autonomy and breaking constraints, and *freedom to*, reflected in *authoring declarations* and *new structures*.

In an influential paper, MacCallum (1967) has challenged the oppositional view by arguing that freedom as a singular construct that is instantiated within specific relations between *agency* and *constraints*. The promise of this conceptualization of freedom lies in asking us to think about the nature of agency and one's ability to exercise it in contexts with varying constraints. For EE research, it brings a closer focus on the entrepreneur as a socially constituted agent, the specific

¹ Philosophers distinguish between autonomy and freedom, with the latter being concerned with ability act without external or internal constraints, whereas the former being concerned with the independence and authenticity of the motivations behind one's actions (Meyers, 1989).

contexts within which she operates and contends with, and the trajectories of change she can enact.

Agency. Anchoring EE in the idea of expanding freedom suggests the need for further theorization of the agency that animates it. A person's agency is based on the "freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve" (Sen, 1985: 203-204). Proponents of negative freedom place emphasis on the agent as an individual, and the freedom to pursue one's goals unencumbered by others, institutional structures and even social bonds. Proponents of positive freedom relate the agent's goals to her context and collectivity (see Rindova et al., 2022 for a discussion of market-based versus civic-based EE). The notion of responsible agency combines the two in seeing agency as originating in a person's "aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations and – in a broad sense – the person's conception of the good" (Sen, 1985: 203).

The responsible agency view therefore foregrounds the moral nature of agency, reasoning, and imagination as processes that animate EE in ways that the cognitive-calculative capacities emphasized by current models of rational or boundedly rational choice do not. Integrating humanistic notions of the self as one who recognizes uniqueness, dignity, and agency in oneself *and* in others are particularly important for understanding how entrepreneurial pursuits expand individual *and* collective freedom. Recognizing common humanity provides the basis for moral imagination, which underlies the ability of entrepreneurs to engage in personally meaningful projects that change the experiences and life conditions of others. By adopting entrepreneurial means entrepreneurs are able to: a) involve others as partners and stakeholders; b) serve them through products and services that address needs and reduce constraints; and c) co-create with them new social and institutional arrangements. Emphasizing the nature of agency in EE poses new questions about how entrepreneurship supports the development and exercise of agency and how the development and exercise of agency alter entrepreneurial processes and their target domains and focal goals. It calls for further inquiry into the relationship between resources and freedom, and the change processes that could expand both – for oneself and others.

Constraints and Preventive Conditions. Freedom is further defined by the absence of preventive conditions that obstruct an agent's pursuits. The original formulation of EE emphasized freeing oneself and others from constraints, such as conventions that stabilize and habituate action. Such constraints of cognitive and structural inertia may be beneficial to a degree, as they increase ease and efficiency of action, but also limiting -- to the agent's freedom to achieve imagined better worlds. EE overcomes or removes such constraints through the generation of new productive alternatives, such as new products, business models, industry architectures, and social arrangements.

The types of constraints noted above, however, are not necessarily preventive conditions for the exercise of freedom. They may, in fact, stimulate imagining of possibilities and provide resources for action and change. In contrast, preventive conditions reduce people's capabilities to either take specific actions, or to engage in processes that improve their capabilities to do or become what they value. Preventive conditions that persistently restrict the capabilities of people to exercise their agency -- "so that they are unequally and unnecessarily unfree to live well" (Drydyk, 2021: 530) -- are defined as oppression. Distinguishing between constraints that

obstruct specific courses of action in specific places and times from constraints that persistently and pervasively reduce the ability of groups of people to exercise their agency by obstructing what they can do or become, is important for advancing the understanding of entrepreneurship as an emancipatory process. The former type are constraints that tend to arise from cognitive and structural inertia. The latter type are preventive conditions that tend to reside in aggregate properties of social systems and structures and reflect competing agent beliefs and social goals.

Differentiating the nature of constraints and their impact on freedom calls for future research on the different processes, activities, and strategies emancipatory entrepreneurs may need to imagine and employ. Addressing such questions will generate systematic knowledge about how EE can expand freedom and address conditions of unfreedom in different contexts and for different social groups (also see Atkins in this dialogue on strengths and weaknesses of both deficit and agency frameworks). Understanding how EE enables people to change what they *can do and become* opens hopeful pathways to transforming impossibilities into possibilities, and possibilities into social and economic opportunities for people to live well, by their own definitions of this goal.

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