Introduction: Towards a Republic of Health?

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Republicanism is the political doctrine that holds that society should be ordered on the basis of principles that prioritize the value of individual freedom. Republicans' focus on individual freedom is shared with many variants of Liberalism, but they contrast with the latter by virtue of adopting a distinctive conception of freedom as non-domination (Pettit, 2007, 2012, 2014). For a more expansive understanding of Republicanism, see e.g. White (2011). For republicans, you are free insofar as you are robustly protected from even the mere possibility of someone arbitrarily interfering with your choices. Republican freedom is freedom from alien control, in Philip Pettit's influential account (Pettit, 2006).¹

This special issue is organized around a key question: should republicans care about health? One answer builds on the idea that freedom implies a respect for the goals and values that individuals set for themselves, an acceptance and recognition that in a free society individuals are sovereign over their own lives. It is a well-documented fact that health is special in the limited sense of most people rating good health as amongst one of the most important goods.² Republicans should care about health to the extent that free agents value health. A second response, building onto the first, is that many believe that health is instrumentally valuable in that good health underlies the enjoyment of most other values. In a nutshell, whatever the goals you have set yourself, suffering from ill-health is likely to hamper or undermine their fulfilment. This makes health (somewhat) special in a different sense.

Of course, individuals differ considerably in terms of how much priority they grant health compared to other ends (including short-term enjoyment of 'unhealthy' activities) and this introduces the sort of complications that are taking up considerable space in contemporary discussions about health and justice (Coggon, 2012). But these complications notwithstanding, republicans seem to have good reasons to care about individual and population health and, consequently, good reasons to take part in the growing debate about how society ought to regulate access to health. The republican case for health, as outlined before, remains weak, however.

There is little distinctively republican about respecting people's views about the priority of health, or about granting health instrumental importance for many aspects of living a fulfilling and satisfactory life (compare Hausman, 2015). To put it differently, one scarcely needs to adopt Republicanism to affirm health on those grounds.

To probe the relationship between health and republican political theory a little more, consider a distinction proposed by Philip Pettit. In *Republicanism* he distinguishes instances of interference that *compromise* freedom from those that merely *condition* freedom (Pettit, 2007). Freedom is conditioned when the range of options or choices which individuals can freely exercise are restricted, which could for instance easily happen in serious cases of ill health. In those cases, your *option freedom* may be restricted, but this does not necessarily imply that your *agency freedom* is also affected; and the latter is what matters for republicans (Pettit, 2003). For freedom to be compromised, as opposed to merely its effective exercise conditioned, it needs to be the case that one's choices are subjected to alien control. The distinctive republican interest in health, then, emerges where either poor health states themselves or the attempts of a society to improve health outcomes risk compromising freedom.³

Within this broad remit, both health states and health interventions are natural sites of potential concern for republican political theorists. The republican principle of non-domination may be able to cast a distinctive light on the many trade-offs and balancing acts that characterize the contemporary regulation of individual and population health—the *republic of health*. In an arena that is largely dominated (pun intended!) by Rawlsians and capability theorists, (Daniels, 2008; Venkapataram, 2011) an infusion of new principles and guidelines is to be welcomed. In addition, reflections about the relationship between health and republican freedom also serve the purpose of an important reality check for republican *theory*: in our view, a theory that has little or nothing to say about such an important area of human well-being runs the risk of rapid depreciation. In light of these

reflections it is perhaps odd to find that, with some important exceptions, republicans have failed to properly engage with the vast and growing area of health and public health.⁴ The purpose of this special issue is an attempt at rectifying this lacuna.

This special issue builds on a workshop we held at Southampton University on 13–14 May 2014. The workshop, jointly organized by the McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy and the Health, Ethics and Law unit at Southampton University, brought together experts in republican political theory and public health scholars. Putting political theorists, ethicists, legal scholars and public health theorists and practitioners in a room for a 2-day intensive discussion of the merits and problems of applying republican ideas to health proved stimulating but challenging. The workshop and the contributions in this special issue cover a range of issues, yet merely start scratching the surface of the complex relationship between health status and health interventions, individual freedom, moral and social agency, the role of the state, and so on. We want to take the opportunity here to thank both participants (not all of whom were able to contribute to the special issue) and those instrumental in making the workshop happen. As editors we were keen to keep the dialogue format of the original workshop by pairing each of the articles with two commentaries. We are grateful to Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij for supporting our ideas in this regard, and for excellent editorial support throughout.

Notes

1. 'Enjoying social freedom (having a status that guards you against arbitrary interference) means being proof or at least being relatively proof against [arbitrary] interference. No matter what your preferences are, and no matter what the feelings of others happen to be, your social standing will still serve you well. It will provide a protective field that makes you resistant to the arbitrary incursions of others. It will ensure that, intuitively, you are in control of what you choose Pettit (2006: 136).'
2. This limited sense is different from health being special within political philosophy. Cf. Segall (2007).
3. The latter means that health is necessarily politicized. On the idea of public health as necessarily political, see Coggon (2012).
4. Exceptions include the work of Beauchamp (1985), Jennings (2007, 2009). These thinkers occupy the communitarian end of republican political theory. Philip Pettit recently contributed to the field but his article engages hardly with the major questions in health and public health. Cf. Pettit (2015).

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