

Covenantal Republicanism and the Theory of Non-Domination

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Introduction

The revival of republican political theory in recent decades has been driven largely by renewed interest in the concept of liberty as non-domination. Thinkers such as Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner have argued that freedom is best understood not merely as the absence of interference but as protection from arbitrary power. At the same time, scholars of Jewish political thought have increasingly emphasized covenant, constitutionalism, distributed authority, and moral responsibility as central features of the Hebrew political tradition.

This chapter brings these conversations together. It argues that covenantal politics and republican political theory share important concerns regarding power, accountability, civic virtue, and law. Yet the covenantal tradition also contributes dimensions often absent from secular republican theory, including transcendent moral obligations, covenantal responsibility, and a theological understanding of human dignity.

Liberty as Non-Domination

The republican tradition defines domination as the condition in which one person or institution possesses arbitrary power over another. Even benevolent rulers may dominate if their authority remains unchecked. Freedom therefore requires institutions capable of restraining arbitrary power.

This insight resonates strongly with the biblical memory of Egypt. The Exodus is not merely a liberation from hard labor. It is liberation from arbitrary rule. Pharaoh embodies unchecked authority. Covenant emerges as the alternative.

Power and Accountability

Both republican and covenantal traditions recognize that power is necessary yet dangerous. Political communities require leadership, law, administration, and coercive capacities. At the same time, these instruments can easily become oppressive if they are not constrained.

The Hebrew political tradition addresses this problem through covenant, distributed authority, prophecy, law, and moral accountability. Republican theory addresses it through constitutionalism, civic participation, and institutional checks. The approaches differ, but the concern remains shared.

Virtue and Citizenship

A central feature of republican thought is the belief that liberty depends upon virtue. Citizens must possess the character required for self-government. A society lacking responsibility, discipline, and public spirit will struggle to preserve freedom.

The covenantal tradition reaches a similar conclusion. Torah seeks to form citizens capable of justice, responsibility, and moral judgment. The commandments educate character. Families and communities transmit values across generations. Political freedom rests upon moral formation.

The Common Good

Modern politics often emphasizes individual interests. Republican and covenantal traditions both insist that political communities must pursue common goods that transcend private advantage. Justice, trust, stability, education, and mutual responsibility contribute to the flourishing of all members of society.

The covenant deepens this idea by framing the common good within a larger moral and spiritual purpose. Human communities exist not only for survival but also for the pursuit of truth, virtue, and covenantal responsibility.

Law and Constitutional Order

Republican thinkers place great importance upon constitutional structures capable of limiting power. The Hebrew tradition similarly places law above rulers. Kings remain subject to Torah. Judges remain accountable to standards beyond themselves. Political authority operates within a framework that precedes and constrains it.

This constitutional dimension helps explain the enduring appeal of the Hebrew Republic. It offers a vision of government in which authority serves law rather than replacing it.

The Limits of Secular Republicanism

While covenantal and republican traditions share important concerns, they are not identical. Secular republican theory often struggles to explain why citizens should remain committed to the sacrifices demanded by civic life. It emphasizes virtue but sometimes lacks a stable account of its ultimate foundations.

The covenantal tradition addresses this challenge by grounding civic responsibility in transcendent obligations. Citizens participate in a moral order larger than themselves. Political commitment therefore acquires both ethical and spiritual significance.

Toward a Covenantal Republicanism

A covenantal republicanism would seek to integrate the strongest insights of both traditions. From republican theory it would draw concerns about domination, constitutional limits, civic participation, and public accountability. From the covenantal tradition it would draw moral responsibility, transcendent purpose, and the formation of virtuous citizens.

Such a framework does not eliminate political disagreement. Rather, it provides a common moral language through which disagreement can occur without destroying social trust.

Contemporary Relevance

Contemporary democracies face growing polarization, declining institutional trust, increasing concentrations of power, and weakening civic commitments. Both republican and covenantal traditions offer resources for addressing these challenges.

Their shared emphasis on virtue, accountability, constitutional order, and responsibility reminds citizens that freedom requires continual maintenance. Liberty survives only when accompanied by institutions and character capable of sustaining it.

Conclusion

The dialogue between covenantal politics and republican political theory reveals deep areas of convergence. Both traditions seek to restrain domination, cultivate virtue, and preserve liberty through accountable institutions. Yet covenantal thought adds a profound moral and theological dimension that enriches the republican understanding of freedom.

The result is a vision of political life in which liberty, responsibility, virtue, and covenant reinforce one another. This synthesis provides a promising framework for thinking about citizenship, constitutionalism, and public life in the twenty-first century.

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