

Freedom: The Secret of Normativity

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Abstract

Norms, more specifically, human responsibilities, are the premise of understanding freedom, and in turn, we can reveal the secret of normativity by understanding freedom. In traditional freedom, normativity refers to the freedom of choice and the freedom of the power of action. The former is free will, and the latter is two opposite orientations for social conditions. The freedom of laissez-faire is based on the premise of canceling social conditions, and the absolute spiritual freedom is aimed at maintaining social conditions. The traditional freedom regards freedom as something preexistent, so it is a meta-physical normativity. In Dewey's freedom, normativity refers to the internal correlations between choice and the two freedoms of action power, which is manifested as rational choice, that is, examining its social conditions while retaining the choice. The rational choice embodies the principle of individuality, which expresses the reality of the existent structure that the actor is different from other actors by their actions. Dewey's freedom is a factual description of the internal relation and structure of freedom, so it is a naive normativity. In universal freedom, normativity means the logical unity of universality and historicity of freedom. The universal significance of Aristotle's practical starting point and the fore-structures of Gadamer's understanding together constitute the meaning of the universal freedom. Universal freedom is the concrete application of the universal. In short, universal freedom is the origin of normativity.

Keywords

Free Will, Power of Action, Individuality, Universal Freedom, Normativity

1. Introduction

No matter from the real situations or the scientific research, normative issue has become the most concerning issue today. In Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity*, she pointed out that people roughly distinguished normative sources

into four types, namely the realistic, the voluntaristic, the human nature's and the self-disciplined. The discussions of normativity in this paper are based on the concept of human freedom, that is, explaining the secret of normativity from the connotations of realistic freedom. Since the French Revolution, the idea of universal freedom has become an unshakable belief. "I too am in favor of a government and politics that would allow for mutual understanding and the freedom of all. But this is not due to the influence of Habermas. It has been self-evident to any European since the French Revolution, since Hegel and Kant" (Gadamer, 1983: p. 264). Specifically, although the freedom for all people refers to a never-ending and open task for the future, it is no longer possible for anyone to admit that humanity is not free. Based on this, Dewey further pointed out that freedom was not the kind of objective love for knowledge, so its source is not the truth and false of freedom, but from different needs to reflect different utilities. To understand freedom as a need and utility is to focus on the future and change from the present situation. In a variety of different needs and utilities, morality is the primary need, and choice is the primary utility. In Dewey's own words, "The center of this moral need and cause is the fact of choice... that man without choice is a puppet... choice that when expressed in action makes things different from what they otherwise would be" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 262). In this way, although the choice itself is neither self-explanatory nor self-proof, the moral choice at least provides us with an entrance to understand freedom, and it is all these entrances that guide us to gradually reveal freedom as the secret of normativity.

2. Traditional Freedom: A Metaphysical Normativity

According to Dewey, the traditional freedom, which Dewey called the orthodox freedom, contains two independent theories of freedom, one focuses on the concept of choice as the core of understanding freedom, the other focuses on the action power as the core of understanding freedom.

The view of choice as the core of freedom was related to the given of men in its early stages. Men here refers to the people at this early stage, and what the given is refers to "praise and blame; to reward and punishment" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 263). Based on this given of men, when civilization develops to a certain extent, a certain civilization organization will reward and punish people according to their behaviors. This fact shows that men are responsible for their actions. Thus, it raises further questions about the basis of responsibility. Because, unless the person is responsible for his behaviors, the reward or punishment is unfair, and if the person cannot control his behaviors, then there is no responsibility and justice. It is this crucial legal significance of the essential nature of responsibility that enables the freedom theory centered on the concept of choice. The first is the given of men for responsibilities, the second is the essence of choice or the basis of responsibility, and the last is the theory of freedom. "The outcome was the doctrine known as freedom of will: the notion that a power called lies

back of choice as its author, and is the ground of liability and the essence of freedom. This will has the power of indifferent choice; that is, it is equally free to choose one way or another unmoved by any desire or impulse, just because of a causal force residing in will itself" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 263). So, just as the legal responsibility is one of given of men, the free will to explain the nature of the resulting choice is also one of given of men. Free will is independent of human desire or impulse, and it has its own law of operation, namely the causal force. In short, freedom is an indifferent (objective) choice. In Dewey's view, the choice of moral and legal significance from its early stages was formed in the Roman law of the Roman Empire and was further accomplished in Christian theology and practice. In other words, the freedom expressed by recourse to responsibility is a historical fact. Unfortunately, because it is assumed that responsibility is one of given of men, and the theory of free will, which reveals the basis of responsibility, is embodied as a metaphysical normativity. Dewey saw this correctly, and therefore advocated to understand the responsibility and basis of responsibility (freedom) from the real situations.

Dewey thought that the doctrine of free will has two main problems. First, the direction of understanding responsibility is wrong, we should not understand responsibility from the preexistent causal conditions but from the future consequent differences. First, responsibility is the responsibility of men, and men are always the person in a specific situation under specific historical conditions. Therefore, free will, as an external desire or impulse, cannot be the basis of responsibility of specific person. Secondly, a specific person is different from a stone because the person's responsible behaviors can bring about changes in its future consequences. Therefore, considering responsibility from the future consequent differences of responsibility is more in line with the realities of responsibility compared with the preexistent causes of free will. Second, responsibility is not based on the causal force of free will, but on a preference to change prudently. It is not enough to point out that the responsibilities of a person can be explained by the future consequences of his behaviors, because a horse can also change its future behaviors according to the way they are treated. Therefore, the responsibilities of the person must come from the internal cause of the person to cause its future consequences, and Dewey called it educability. For Dewey, educability refers to the preference of people as existences. Based on this, Dewey points out, "the new preference may reflect this operation of mind, especially the forecast of the consequences of acting upon the various competing preferences" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 266). This preference of educability to predict is the preference to change prudently as the basis of human responsibility.

Dewey tried to find the basis of responsibility from the future of the acts of responsibility rather than the past, and turning the causal force of free will into a preference to change prudently. The cause of free will is in its mysterious causal force, the cause of the preference of changes prudently is in its universal characters of changes as existences. However, just as Dewey cannot understand the mysterious causal forces of free will, we can not understand Dewey's preferences

as the universal features of existences. It is obvious that merely pointing out that the existence of people who differ from other things has a preference of educability cannot distinguish the differences of the preferences as the universal features from the level of existence. Therefore, Dewey's explanation of responsibility and freedom here is a transition from a metaphysical normativity to another.

It is precisely because people are unable to understand responsibility and freedom by will or ability, they turn to the inquiry into freedom centered on the power of action. In the latter's view, the former discussions of freedom is too subjective, or a kind of personal freedom. Therefore, freedom centered on the concept of choice has nothing to do with this freedom that people struggle, bleed and even sacrifice for freedom. In other words, freedom refers to the freedom from oppression and dictatorship, the freedom of institutions and laws. In this way, the understanding of freedom changes from the concept of choice to the power of action or open action. The theory of freedom with action power is expressed in two opposite directions. One direction advocates that the power of action should be based on the abolition of social conditions, and Locke is the representative. The other direction is that the power of action should be aimed at maintaining social conditions, and Hegel is the representative.

For Locke, the founder of classical liberalism, freedom refers to the power to act in line with choice. The power of action refers to the practical ability to enable the desires and ends to be executed, and to enable the choices made to be executed. Practical experience tells us that some laws and institutions will hinder and interfere with the implementation of the power of action, and these obstacles and interferences constitute what we call slavery and oppression. Thus, unlike individual freedom merely emphasizing the concept of choice, public freedom demands a guaranteed power of action. The guarantee of the power of action requires the abolition of the oppressive institutions, autocratic laws and various modes of management. It can be seen that the power of action represents liberation, it is to have the rights and actively show the rights, that is, the rights are the self-determined rights of action. In parallel with the power of action being manifested as self-determination politically, the power of economic action is manifested as a natural demand. The emphasis on the economic natural needs began with Locke, and in the late eighteenth century replaced the political natural rights as the center of discussion of the power of action, that is, unimpeded labour and exchange. This combination of politically natural rights and economically natural needs was a dominant doctrine of freedom for most of the nineteenth century. It is thus understood that all management is oppressive, and our principles should be non-interference, so that management should be limited as much as possible to protect one person's freedom from interference from another. This is the so-called *laissez-faire* theory of freedom and the theory of management of the police functions.

Ironically, this *laissez-faire* freedom has spawned a philosophy of self-expression, and it is the latter who demands against the former. In the same way of thinking freedom, in the fields of psychology, instincts or impulses naturally replace rights

and demands as the power of action advocated by freedom. However, the more we advocate instincts or impulses, the more we demand the cancellation of rights and needs. Because, for the self-expression of impulses and desires, it requires us to be exempted from the restrictions of various social conditions such as rights and demands. This reliance on and emphasis on instincts or impulses highlight the metaphysical side of the power of action that appeals to natural rights and demands. "Instincts and impulses, however they may be defined, are part of the 'natural' constitution of man; a statement in which 'natural' signifies 'native', original. The theory assigns a certain intrinsic rightness in this original structure, rightness in the sense of conferring upon impulses a title to pass into direct action, except when they directly and evidently interfere with similar self-manifestation in others" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 269). In Dewey's view, the natural compositions of people, rights, demands, or impulses of people in different fields, ignores the parts that they arise when they are associated with their surrounding environments, especially social conditions. From the perspective of laissez-faire freedom, as long as we can freely express our natural compositions, then all the problems in the political, economic and other fields can be solved by ourselves. But historical experience tells us that the so-called politically and economically natural compositions, in fact are, because of the changes of social life, the new possibilities of the propertied classes, rather than the natural existences inherent in the structures of original talents. The freedom of the natural power of action, or to recognize that everyone is equal in the legal sense without considering other social conditions, is absurd. History has also proved that the freedom of laissez-faire is only the freedom of a few people, but for the most people, it brings about new oppression. The so-called natural rights, demands and impulses are only consequences caused by historical events, so the return to the positive and constructive changes in social life is what people need to be further explored.

The freedom to think about the power of action based on social conditions begins with Spinoza and gets done in Hegel. For Spinoza, the highest existence (entity) refers to nature (god), and man is only a modus of nature. Therefore, for those who pursue freedom, the possibility lies in the natural power of action. But man, as a natural mode, is only a very small part of the entity. In this way, even if people have natural compositions (rights, demands, impulses, etc.), they have no abilities to implement it. By man himself, it is no different from the other modus that form the entity. In other words, the realization of human freedom is based on the realization of the freedom of other modes, that is, the modus is not freedom but only dependent. However, from the perspective of entity, man is not only a mode of extension, but also a mode of capable of thinking. As a mode of thinking, man has an ability to understand the order of entities, so that his behaviors are consistent with the order of entities. Therefore, as far as people share this natural power, the power of human action is freedom. It can be seen that here freedom is equivalent to operational rationality. Thus, "Law, however imperfect and poor, is at least a recognition of the universal, of the interconnection

of parts, and hence operates as a schoolmaster to bring men to reason, power, and freedom” (Dewey, 1960a: p. 274). Therefore, even the worst management is better than without any management, and social conditions such as the legal institutions are a prerequisite for freedom.

Two centuries later in Germany, Spinoza’s theory of freedom was revived in Hegel’s institutional idealism. Hegel’s single entity (spirit) replaces Spinoza’s dual entity (nature), while the expressions of entity’s orders replace the relationships of geometric patterns with evolutionary developments. Hegel’s dialectic shows that this development is logical or internally time-free. However, from the external situations, the internal logical developments of spirit show itself as the processes of time. In other words, the spirit reflects itself through the objective and rational developments such as the legal institutions. In this way, individuals can only obtain freedom and realize rationality by participating in the institutional social life. “The institutions of property, criminals and civil law, the family and above all the national state are the instrumentalities of rationality in outward action and hence of freedom. History is a record of the development of freedom through development of institutions. The philosophy of history is the understanding of this record in terms of the progressive manifestation of the objective form of absolute mind” (Dewey, 1960a: p. 275). Therefore, freedom is not of original gift, but of growth and attainment, which is realized through the idealization of social conditions and the active participation of individual loyalty. However, whether freedom refers to nature or spirit, it is metaphysical and mysterious compared to human responsibilities. Under the special historical conditions, the specific person is always the bearer of responsibilities, and whether we tell the history with nature or spirit, the history of man is still external, because the reasons here are the non-historical nature or spirit. It was also in this sense that Dewey stated that Spinoza’s ideas were integrated into a new metaphysical framework, institutional idealism.

3. Dewey’s Freedom: A Naivenormativity

The traditional freedom, that is, the freedom of choice and the freedom of the power of action, fails to notice the connections between each other, so falls into a metaphysical side when it explains the problem of human responsibilities. In Dewey’s words, except the shared title of freedom, they all develop independently with very little attention to each other. But for Dewey, there is a positive correlation. For if choice does not work in open action, if it does not actually create a difference between things, then choice will no longer matter, and if power refers to natural forces like earthquakes or avalanches, then it will no longer be commendable. “At all events, the essential problem of freedom, it seems to me, is the problem of the relation of choice and unimpeded effective action to each other” (Dewey, 1960a: p. 275). It was in this sense that Dewey believed that the core of the issue of freedom should be the relation of choice and power.

Dewey's understanding of human responsibilities and freedom takes a naive way, which is to explain things as they are without adding any other. "I shall first give the solution to this problem that commends itself to me, and then trust to the further discussion not indeed to prove it but to indicate the reasons for holding it" (Dewey, 1960a: pp. 275-276). Dewey told us, "There is an intrinsic connection between choice as freedom and power of action as freedom. A choice which intelligently manifests individuality enlarges the range of action, and this enlargement in turn confers upon our desires greater insight and foresight, and makes choice more intelligent. There is a circle, but an enlarging circle" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 276). Dewey was well aware of the formality of this solution, so his discourses were mainly presented through specific examples.

Consider the case of an action coming from a blind tendency or a non-reflective impulse. If the consequences of this action do not conflict between the actor and the conditions around him, then it is the credit of luck. Because the surrounding conditions are against the realization of the tendency of the actor, they not only hinder it, but also lead the actor into new or even more serious entanglements. When luck is on the actor's side, the surrounding conditions happen to be favorable, and the actor himself may have some instinctive forces to remove all obstacles. It seems that the actor may have gained some freedom, but it is the result of luck and not because of himself. And new luck will only further encourage the blindness and dependence of actor, because in the long run luck is an exception. On the contrary, if the action of actor is rational, that is, considering its consequences which depend on the interactions of action and its environment, then the action of actor must consider the surrounding conditions. Thinking about action from its consequences is not simply judging action by successes or failures. Because no one can foresee all the consequences, and more precisely, no one is aware of all the conditions that work. In other words, the actor cannot completely exclude luck from the consequences of his action. Therefore, however perfect the plan is, the action of actor may also fail. But even if the action fails, the actor can learn something new from the consequences of the action to set the foundations for a better action next time. What is important here is to develop good habit of interacting with the environment.

The realization of freedom is also concrete in concrete cases, so we understand the different degrees of freedom in different domains. However, in the view of moralists, concrete freedom is not freedom, because the former advocates freedom in the ultimate sense. Dewey recognized some kind of ultimate freedom, but he gave his own explanations. First, because the environment of the actor is manifested as diversified conditions, there are diversified fields of freedom, and the rational choice selects a special field formed by the diversified conditions, such as familial, industrial, political, scientific, artistic and so on. The distinction of different fields here is not absolute, but it is in this distinction that freedom is realized. Second, there may be a field, where freedom is always possible for anyone, no matter how limited the actor is in other areas. This field is the field of

morality. In Dewey's view, although specific freedom is relative to the surrounding conditions, there are no rules running rationally without kindness and justice. In conclusion, the ultimate meaning of freedom is morality: on the one hand, freedom itself is diversified; on the other hand, concrete freedom is based on kindness and justice. Obviously, Dewey's mere appeal to the realities of freedom does not help us better understand the ultimate meaning of freedom. From the extreme side of the view, although Dewey revealed the core problem of freedom, that is, the internal correlation between the freedom of choice and the freedom of power, this revelation itself only stayed at the empirical level. More directly, Dewey's understanding is naive, and he fails to reasonably explain the significances of this internal correlation from the theoretical level. Therefore, Dewey can only finally understand freedom as individuality.

Contrary to the past perspective of traditional freedom (something antecedently given), Dewey thought understanding freedom should start from a future perspective, namely from the differences in the consequences of the actor's actions. "Our idea compels us on the other hand to seek for freedom in which comes to be, in a certain kind of growth; in consequences, rather than in antecedents. We are free not because of what we statically are, but in as far as we are becoming different from what we have been" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 280). To understand this new freedom, return to the puzzles of freedom left by Kant will help. Man has freedom both as the existence of phenomenon and the existence of noumenon, but how is this possible? Dewey pointed out that "there is no superstition more numbing, I think, than the current notion that things are not what they are, and do not do what they are seen to do, because these things have themselves come into being in a causal way" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 282). From the perspective of the new freedom, starting from the future consequences of action, we can find what freedom is not seen in the past perspective of freedom. "Water is what it does rather than what it is caused by" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 282). What is puzzling, however, is that Dewey denied the past perspective and then affirmed a present ability with what he called something in a sense of the present thing. It was also here that Dewey introduced the discourse of individuality.

"Yet we cannot separate power to become from consideration of what already and antecedently is. Capacity to become different, even though we define freedom by it, must be a present capacity, something in some sense present" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 282). For Dewey, this present capacity refers to the fact that all things exist as existences. When we discussed the preference of changing prudently, we mentioned that preference is a common feature of all existences, and Dewey explained further about it here. The preference of existences means, in their natures, that "they have a certain opaque and irreducible individuality which shows itself in what they do; in the fact that they behave in certain ways and not in others" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 282). Individuality is something opaque and irreducible, which is the characteristic of existences. In other words, as long as something exists, then it has individuality. Individuality is not only the reason why

something exists, but also why it distinguishes it from others. In summarizing Dewey's "time and individuality", Bernstein pointed out that individuality was not just an act of choice, because every individual is a history, "an extensive event or course of events process, each of which takes into itself something of the past and leads into the future" (Bernstein, 1960: p. xlvi). In Dewey, the essence of individuality was not "simply external redistribution, rearrangement in space of what previously existed" but contained "genuine qualitative changes" (Dewey, 1960b: p. 237). Therefore, compared with the descriptions of the causal relationships between different things, individuality is the origin of something, and the former may presuppose the latter. "In the description of causal sequences, we still have to start with and from existences, things that are individually and uniquely just what they are. The fact that we can state changes which occur by certain uniformities and regularities does not eliminate this original element of individuality, preference and bias. On the contrary, the statement of laws presupposes just this capacity" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 282). In Dewey's view, the fact of individuality is a fact that we can never escape. We cannot deny individuality by that one thing is the cause of another thing, because it only transforms the individuality of one thing into the individuality of another. For individuality, sciences of discussing the relationships between things are powerless, because the relationships do not touch things themselves or their inferences, they express only some constant connections between the actions of different things.

To sum up, choice embodied by action is a unique action, because it has unique consequences, which is the fact of individuality. Here, we come to the heart of Dewey's freedom, namely how to understand this unique choice and its unique consequences. Dewey's inquiry led him to reveal that what the actor cherished in the name of freedom was actually such a power, which was "that power of varied and flexible growth, of change of disposition and character, the change of rational choice and the ability to flexible growth... so there is a sound basis for the common-sense practical belief in freedom" (Dewey, 1960a: p. 284). When choice is in the form of knowledge of its conditions, it is the capacity to rationally form choice; rational choice is still choice, but choice at this time replaces its blindness with its intellectual characteristics, so the actor increases the possibilities of freedom in actions. Understanding freedom as the individuality of actor in time and the realization of individuality is the final conclusion of Dewey's naive understanding of the fact of human responsibilities.

4. Universal Freedom: The Origin of Normativity

Just as the traditional freedom understood human responsibility as a given, Dewey understood the possibility of freedom as being rooted in human existence itself. In Dewey's own words, "the potentiality of freedom each of us carries with him in his very structure" (Dewey, 1960a: pp. 286-287). Dewey's view easily brings us to the claim of freedom in the Declaration of Human Rights: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. But as history has told us, universal free-

dom, or the freedom of all people, was only a product of the French Revolution. In other words, man is not born and always free, and universal freedom is the product of history. Therefore, Arendt said of freedom, stating that “Isonomy guaranteed equality, but not because all men were born or created equal, but, on the contrary, because men were by nature not equal, and needed an artificial institution, the polis, which by virtue of its νόμος would make them equal. Equality existed only in this specifically political realm, where men met one another as citizens and not as private persons.....The equality of the Greek polis, its isonomy, was an attribute of the polis and not of men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth” (Arendt, 1963: p. 23). If we are aware of the attribute correlations between freedom and city-states, then Dewey only pointed out the conditions that realizing the potentiality of freedom required the liberation of political and economic conditions, but Dewey’s understanding of the meaning of political and economic conditions to freedom is not internal but external.

Arendt’s special life experience made her realize that it was still dangerous to understand freedom only in city-states. The Greek polis were transformed into nation-states in modern society, but it was the universal freedom understood in the form of the nation-states that produced the radical evil like the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, in which the universal freedom became redundant. In other words, if we adhere to the idea of universal freedom, then it is no longer possible to understand it simply as the property of nation-states. It was here that Arendt attached particular attention to the value of independent thinking, to the significance of social deserters (refugees who had lost their countries) to understanding people. The belief in universal freedom did not waver in Arendt. On the contrary, her independent thinking was to better understand and maintain it, so Arendt furthered from the revelation of radical evil to the revelation of the banality of evil. Based on this, Arendt reformulated the term human rights: first, the right to have rights, and second, the right to belong to an organized community (Arendt, 1976: p. 296). In this way, the essence of understanding freedom with the polis in modern society is that the nation-states are a realistic way to express universal freedom. In other words, just as the freedom of polis belongs only to the citizens of the polis, the freedom of nation-states only belongs to their own people.

But universal freedom refers to the freedom of all people, something equally enjoyed by all people, regardless of gender, race, skin, age, etc. Therefore, it is not completely equal between the freedom of nation-states and the universal freedom. This is the starting point where we need to think further about universal freedom. In terms of the differences between universal freedom and the freedom of nation-states, the relationships between democracy as a form of government and democracy as a way of life that Dewey explained may help: “To say that democracy is only a form of government is like saying that a home is a more or less geometrical arrangement of bricks and mortar... It is true; they certainly are so

much. But it is false; they are infinitely more. Democracy, like any other polity, has been finely termed the memory of a historic past, the consciousness of a living present, and the ideal of a coming future. Democracy, in a word, is social, that is to say, an ethical conception, and upon its ethical significance is based its significance as governmental. Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association” (Dewey, 2008: p. 240). Based on this, we can also say that we should understand the form of nation-states in the way of universal freedom. Of course, we cannot go back to Dewey to regard the political and economic conditions as external to freedom, but tend to understand the relationships between the two as content and form, that is, the form without content is empty, and the content without form is blind.

Understanding the positive relationships of content and form with the negative meanings of emptiness and blindness is still abstract, because we cannot draw new positive things from here anymore. Although the concept of universal freedom is not self-explanatory and self-proof, it at least provides an entrance to think about freedom, namely that freedom is universal here and belongs to all people. And, as we know now, freedom is a product of history, and in different times, it belongs to the characteristics of man who is regarded as man. The historicity and universality of freedom guide us to Aristotle and Gadamer. From the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, we can interpret Aristotle with Gadamer or Gadamer with Aristotle. Because it is in the temporal distance that we can find ourselves on the basis of discovering others. In summary, through Gadamer, we discover the universal meaning of Aristotle’s thinking about the starting point of practice; through Aristotle, we discover the connotation of freedom of Gadamer’s understanding.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the concept of starting point of practice is central to Aristotle. “Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these, he is a good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general. Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science, for he is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life, but its discussions start from these and are about these” (Aristotle, 2009: pp. 4-5). It is of great significance for Aristotle to point out that the action of man is the subject he studied here, or more precisely, the action of citizen. In Aristotle’s view, determining the subject-matter of a study determines half of the study. “We must not require look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry... then... our main task may not be subordinated to minor questions. Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the fact be well established, as in the case of the first principles; the fact is a primary thing and first principle. Now of first principles, we see some by induction, some by perception, some by a certain habituation, and others too in other ways. But each set of principles we must try to investigate in a natural way,

and we must take pains to determine them correctly, since they have a great influence on what follows. For the beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole, and many of the questions we ask are cleared up by it” (Aristotle, 2009: p. 12). The starting point is the subject-matter, while the subject-matter of practice is the free activities of the citizens, which is the starting point of Aristotle’s study of ethics. So what is the activity of the freedom of citizens as the starting point? On the one hand, it is the premise of our departure, namely, moral virtues. “Anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is a starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting-points” (Aristotle, 2009: p. 6). On the other hand, it is the purpose of our practice, namely, happiness. The purpose of ethics is goodness, and the highest goodness is happiness. This is the whole meaning of the starting point of practice in Aristotle here. In Aristotle’s words, the subject-matter of practice is the variable thing of itself as a purpose. “Practical wisdom cannot be scientific knowledge or art; not science because that which can be done is capable of being otherwise, not art because action and making are different kinds of thing.....the originating causes of the things that are done consist in the end at which they are aimed” (Aristotle, 2009: p. 106). For Aristotle, the starting point means the beginning point and the starting cause. The beginning point is the starting point of our research, and the starting cause is the purpose of our practice. “There is a difference, as there is in a racecourse between the course from the judges to the turning-point and the way back. For, while we must begin with what is evident, things are evident in two ways—some to us, some without qualification. Presumably, then, we must begin with things evident to us” (Aristotle, 2009: p. 6). What is known to us is known to the citizens, is the political life of citizens alone, that is, the free life of man. The freedom here does not mean all people but the citizens. Aristotle, of course, did not understand the historical meaning of freedom, but saw it as something natural belonging to the citizens.

The fore-structures of Gadamer’s understanding refer to everything that defines what anyone understands. On the one hand, it is the enable and blind prejudices as the starting point of understanding that make us understand. The judgments of true or false are the consequences when understanding is realized. On the other hand, the fore-structures of understanding are the fore-conception of completeness. “But this, too, is obviously a formal condition of all understanding. It states that only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible” (Gadamer, 2006: p. 292). This fore-conception of completeness refers to the relation to the truth between the transcendental expectations of meaning and what is being said. Truth, here, refers to an attitude of trust. For example, we believe the reporter’s news, first of all, because the reporter is present or well informed, that is, we first believe in the identity of the reporter, and this trust has

nothing to do with the authenticity of news. “Understanding means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another’s meaning as such” (Gadamer, 2006: p. 294). The “primarily” here refers to the attitude of trust we take in our understanding, and the “secondarily” here refers to our understanding as a specific application of enable or blind prejudices. Gadamer only regarded the fore-conception of completeness as a relationship of truth, so truth is abstract compared with Aristotle’s freedom as a practical subject. In this sense, Bernstein pointed out that Gadamer’s truth is an evasive concept in the final analysis, and after moving from practice to hermeneutics, we need to return to practice, that is, from exploring the way of practice to exploring the possible conditions of practice (Bernstein, 1986: pp. 105-114). Gadamer simply understood truth as tradition or history and failed to point further to take universal freedom as the relation to truth. “Tradition is not the vindication of what has come down from the past but the further creation of moral and social life; it depends on being made conscious and freely carried on” (Gadamer, 2006: p. 574). Perhaps Gadamer had realized the meaning of freedom to him, but he did not argue it further.

Universal freedom, as the variable thing of itself as a purpose, is the subject of the free practices of all people. As the starting point, universal freedom is not only the premise, but also the purpose of all practices. As the purpose, universal freedom is the truth, that is, the starting cause; as the premise, universal freedom is the enable or blind prejudice, that is, the beginning point. As the starting cause, universal freedom has authority; as the beginning point, universal freedom has fallibility. This kind of activity that defines itself and is defined by itself is the process of universal freedom. In this sense, universal freedom is the basis of human responsibilities, that is, the origin of normativity. In short, the normativity of universal freedom is the unity of universality and historicity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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