

Few ideas possess greater moral force than self-determination. It appears in anti-colonial movements, democratic revolutions, and efforts for national independence. To deny someone the right to determine their own future often appears synonymous with denying them political freedom in a suppressive way. However, the question posed is not whether self-determination is valuable, based on any interpretation. It asks whether the right to self-determination is absolute. Most answers focus on conflicts between self-determination and competing concerns such as territorial integrity, political stability, or minority rights. While important, these debates often assume that self-determination possesses a clear and settled meaning. That assumption deserves greater scrutiny.

The right to self-determination depends on how one understands the causes of human action. Self-determination is defined as “the ability or power to make decisions for yourself, especially the power of a nation to decide how it will be governed,” and different theories of agency, responsibility, and causation produce different accounts of how individuals or political communities determined their own futures, because human causal analysis is inherently subjective. Consequently, disagreement about the absoluteness of the right is aligned with disagreements about the nature of self-determination. This essay argues that no universal answer can be given to the question of whether the right to self-determination is absolute because the meaning of self-determination varies according to the intellectual framework, scale, or lens through which human action is understood.

Political philosophers often treat self-determination based on a simple definition. John Stuart Mill argued that free institutions function best when people govern themselves rather than being governed by outsiders.¹ Anti-colonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon similarly viewed self-determination as a necessary condition of political dignity.² Contemporary international law recognizes the principle through the United Nations Charter³ and numerous declarations concerning colonial peoples and national sovereignty.⁴

These arguments derive strength from a common intuition. People should be free to decide their own future to better reflect their desires rather than having it imposed by another utility-maximizing agent. However, this understanding attributes the causes of political outcomes primarily to peoples' own choices, therefore resting upon a distinction between causes that belong to the self and causes that originate outside it. The difficulty lies in drawing that distinction. Consider a student who achieves a perfect score on an examination. One observer may attribute the result primarily to hard work and discipline. Another may emphasize parental support, access to educational resources, socioeconomic privilege, genetics, or cultural expectations. Neither observer is necessarily mistaken, having simply focused on different levels of explanation. The disagreement only concerns where the chain of causation should stop.

The same problem emerges in political contexts. Suppose a nation votes for independence. One account emphasizes democratic choice, stating that the people collectively expressed their will and therefore determined their political future. A broader account may point to historical grievances, economic pressures, geographic constraints, foreign influence, media narratives, or international institutions. The more comprehensive and in depth the analysis is, the more the event appears increasingly shaped by external forces.

Importantly, facts remain unchanged. What changes is the explanatory framework underlying the facts.

John Locke's theory of individual liberty assumes that persons are capable of directing their own actions through reason and consent.⁵ Responsibility is therefore attributed primarily to the individual. Later traditions have challenged this assumption. Sociologists from Émile Durkheim onwards have emphasized the extent to which behaviour is shaped by social structures that exist prior to any choice.⁶ Consequently, the extent of self-determination appears to expand or contract depending upon the explanatory framework adopted.

Defenders of an absolute right argue that external influences do not eliminate the agency of the individual to pursue self-determination. Human beings are influenced by countless factors, but most people continue to believe that meaningful choice exists. Compatibilist philosophers such as David Hume have long argued that freedom does not require independence from causation.⁷ A person may be shaped by their environment while still primarily acting voluntarily.

However, this argument misassociates external influences with the elimination of agency. It is that the scope of self-determination depends upon how those influences are interpreted. If one adopts a relatively narrow account of causation, self-determination appears substantial. If one adopts a broader account, self-determination appears increasingly constrained. Changes in the explanatory frame influences how self-determination is comprehended.

Rights derive their content from the things they protect. A right to free speech protects speech. Likewise, a right to self-determination protects self-determination. If reasonable disagreement exists concerning the nature and extent of self-determination, disagreement concerning the scope of the right is equally unavoidable. The word “absolute” signifies that the right does not admit exceptions, requiring a stable understanding of what the right protects. Without agreement concerning the nature of self-determination itself, the assertion of absoluteness becomes difficult to sustain.

This problem becomes particularly apparent when examining competing political traditions. Liberal thinkers often understand self-determination in terms of autonomy and consent. The central concern is whether individuals or peoples are free from coercion.⁸ On this view, self-determination remains compatible with numerous social influences as long as choices are not forcibly imposed. By contrast, Marxist and structuralist traditions frequently emphasize the role of economic systems, social institutions, and historical conditions⁹ in shaping human behaviour.¹⁰ Simple things appearing to be a free choice¹¹ may in fact reflect deeper structural constraints.¹²

Neither perspective can simply dismiss the other. Liberal theories capture the reality of human agency. Structural theories reveal the often invisible forces shaping everyday decisions. The debate persists because both illuminate genuine aspects of human action. Consequently, disputes about self-determination often conceal disputes about causation.¹³ Two people may appear to disagree about political rights while actually disagreeing about how human choices should be explained. One emphasizes individual agency, as the other emphasizes structural influence. Their conclusions regarding self-determination differ because their underlying theories of action differ.

A critic, however, may argue that this confuses conceptual uncertainty with political practice. After all, societies routinely make judgments despite philosophical disagreement. Nothing requires a complete definition of free will before the assignment of responsibility, nor a definitive theory of justice before the establishment of legal rights.¹⁴

It is true that political institutions cannot wait for philosophical consensus, but the question asks about whether the right is absolute. Absoluteness is an unusually demanding standard that requires a justification capable of overriding all competing considerations.¹⁵ The burden of proof therefore rests with those who defend absoluteness. They must demonstrate not merely that self-determination is valuable, but that it possesses a uniquely privileged status, which becomes difficult when the object of the right remains contested at a fundamental level.¹⁶

Historical appeals to self-determination have justified both liberation and exclusion.¹⁷ They have supported anti-colonial independence movements and nationalist projects that marginalized minority populations.¹⁸ Competing groups frequently invoke the same principle while reaching incompatible conclusions, as each claims to represent the authentic self whose future must to be protected.¹⁹ These conflicts reveal that self-determination is not a self-interpreting concept. Its application depends upon prior

judgments concerning agency, identity, and political legitimacy. The right cannot escape these underlying assumptions.

For example, during the Scottish independence movement, supporters frequently described independence as an exercise in democratic self-determination, arguing that political authority should reflect the will of the Scottish people.²⁰ Critics, however, emphasize economic interdependence, constitutional obligations, and the interests of citizens opposing secession.²¹ Both sides with legitimate considerations differ fundamentally in how they interpret the causes and consequences of political action. The disagreement concerns the meaning of self-determination itself.

None of this implies that self-determination lacks value. On the contrary, the principle remains one of the most important achievements of modern political thought. Individuals and peoples possess strong interests in shaping the conditions. The rejection of colonial domination and political coercion reflects moral progress. Yet recognizing the importance of self-determination differs from declaring its right absolute.

The strongest conclusion is therefore not that self-determination is unreal, nor that the right does not exist. Rather, it is that the absoluteness of the right depends upon prior philosophical commitments concerning the nature of human action. Different theories of causation produce different conceptions of self-determination, and different conceptions of self-determination produce different understandings of the right.

The question asks whether the right to self-determination is absolute. This essay argues that no universal answer can be given independently of the framework through which self-determination is understood. Before deciding whether the right is absolute, one must first interpret what it means for a self to determine anything at all. Until that deeper disagreement is resolved, the absoluteness of the right remains inseparable from the assumptions.

Endnotes

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3. United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice* (San Francisco: United Nations, 1945), art. 1, par. 2.
4. United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, Resolution 1514 (XV), December 14, 1960.
5. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Second Treatise, chap. 2, sec. 6.
6. Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W. D. Halls, ed. Steven Lukes (New York: Free Press, 1982), 50–59.
7. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), sec. 8, pt. 1.
8. Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121–124.
9. Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 149–155.
10. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127–133.
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52–56.
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13. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 14–19.
14. Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (January 1971): 6–11.
15. Allen Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 27–31.
16. Allen Buchanan, “The Theories of Secession,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 34–38.
17. Antonio Cassese, *Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal and Ideological History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11–15.

18. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75–82.
19. Neil MacCormick, “Nation and Nationalism,” in *Legal Right and Social Democracy: Essays in Legal and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 249–252.
20. Scottish Government, *Scotland’s Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2013), 10–15.
21. Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, “National Self-Determination,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 9 (September 1990): 441–447.

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