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Freedom in Times of Struggle: Positive Liberty, Again

Abstract: Many of those critical of traditional liberalism have focused on the notion of freedom at the center of that approach, namely the (negative) idea of liberty as the absence of interferences with action. Building a plausible and normatively acceptable positive alternative, however, has faced numerous criticisms and challenges. In this paper I discuss what such critics of liberalism see as the limitations of the traditional negative notion and sketch the core components of a positive alternative. Specifically I suggest that the dimensions of liberty should contain the positive elements of capabilities and agent authenticity. After laying out the core of these ideas I briefly defend them against standard objections. In doing so, I argue that such a positive notion is necessary to capture the dominance of the language of freedom in contexts of resistance and struggle in the actual, non-ideal, world.

1. Introduction

Self-described radical critics of traditional liberalism have often focused on the conception of liberty at the heart of that tradition, structured as it is around non-interference in the actions of (rational) individuals, without essential reference to the ways that forms of social power, ideology, structural inequality, and deprivation may undercut a person's freedom. Liberals have argued, in turn, that positive conceptions of freedom, especially those touted in the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, often import problematically idealist elements or fail to capture the unique quality of liberty as a social value, reducing freedom to self-realization or to mere capability for example.¹ However, there are still those who want to continue to develop theoretical notions that aid in conceptualizing the critique of traditional liberalism on the grounds that domination and deprivation should be understood as involving limitations on freedom independent of the way that opportunities to act might be affected. Specifically, the (negative) liberal conception of freedom leaves out of account two crucial aspects of people's capacity for self-governing agency: the relation between agency and social oppression (i.e., the relevance of ideology to freedom), and the connection between freedom and material conditions of action.

¹ See, e.g., Kramer 2003; Carter 1999; Steiner 1983; and Flathman 1987. These theorists don't specifically target Marxist views as such, but the issues they raise are relevant here.

In this paper, I wade back into these debates about the concept of freedom and defend various positive aspects of liberty in ways that I hope avoid standard objections to that perspective. For example, seeing freedom, in part, as the capacity for self-governing agency need not entail metaphysically suspect views of the self or problematically perfectionist commitments, as has been charged. Moreover, connecting liberty to capabilities (and hence one's material conditions) does not reduce freedom to other notions, such as mere ability or power.

Another aspect of certain critiques of liberal orthodoxy that I utilize here is the shift to 'non-ideal theory' of a certain sort, specifically the shift in orientation that occurs when one undertakes the analysis of political concepts like freedom from the perspective of those struggling to attain it rather than those already enjoying it. This shift in perspective puts more pressure on such analyses to capture why ideas like freedom and liberty have such liberatory force in the discourses surrounding social resistance movements. Only from this perspective can we capture the unique value that freedom has for participants in such struggles.

In the end, I claim that standard liberal notion of negative freedom—the absence of interference by others—is limited as a singular concept of liberty and that only if we recognize the importance of positive elements to freedom can we claim for that notion the liberatory force so often attached to it.

2. Departing from Traditional Liberal Freedom: Motivations and Methods

In the liberal tradition, freedom generally refers to the absence of interference by others in one's actions, either one's actions *per se* or one's morally permissible actions.² In general, that idea sees freedom as the absence of constraints on possible actions by individual persons, specifically constraints put in place by other human beings (or, on some views, constraints for which other persons are responsible).³ As Berlin famously put it, liberty is "the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others" (Berlin 1969, 122).

Recently, various theorists have attempted to fine tune this idea and make it defensible, as a general account of freedom that is measurable, intuitively plausible, and conceptually independent of particular moral commitments or views of the good life (see, e.g., Kramer 2003 and Carter 1999). The main idea of these views is that in order for the idea of freedom to function the way it does in theoretical discourse, it should be seen as referring purely to opportunities to act, so that freedom refers to the absence of physical barriers to actions agents are able to perform but which are blocked by the actions of other human beings. On Mathew Kramer's view, for example, a person is free to do x if and only if she is able to do x, and she is unfree to do x if and only if she would be able to do so in the absence of being directly or indirectly prevented from so doing by the

² The literature on the nature of freedom, both inside and outside the liberal tradition, is voluminous. For an overview see Carter 2003. Also in this discussion I use the terms 'liberty' and 'freedom' interchangeably.

³ For discussion of the view that defines constraints in terms of human responsibility, see Miller 1983 and Kristjánsson 1996.

actions or dispositions of other persons.⁴ This is a view of particular freedom—to do x. Overall freedom is defined as a function of such particular freedoms.⁵ Others have echoed this approach, stressing that freedom is a function of external barriers to action independent of whether such actions are desired by the agent, virtuous, valuable, or morally permissible.

One thing to emphasize up front is that there is nothing philosophically or conceptually problematic about understanding freedom in this way. Seeing freedom as purely a set of action opportunities may well be useful in any number of contexts. However, as I will argue presently, theorists who are attempting to capture and unpack normative concepts that function in both positive theories of justice and, importantly, in the public discourse used by those struggling to achieve more just conditions, will find this understanding of liberty wanting in several respects.

Saying that, however, touches on the complex issue of methodology in these contexts: that is, what exactly are the ground rules by which to debate conceptual issues like this? Pure intuitive plausibility will only get us so far, especially since everyday usage often reflects ideological and political commitments that we want these concepts to help us settle, such as whether unequal societies with entrenched poverty count as relatively unfree because of those factors; or whether groups fighting for ‘liberation’ use the language of freedom and liberty in the right way when they use the word in their songs, slogans, and rallying cries.

This is a thorny issue and turns, at least, on the question of the essential contestability of concepts such as this. The position I want to take on this methodological issue will be, I hope, a narrow and unambitious one (and by that token less controversial), namely that a philosophical understanding of a concept like liberty must be applicable to—must capture the usage in—contexts in which this idea has the most motivational force. In particular, ‘freedom’ must be defined in a way that in broad terms makes sense of its use for people that put such great stake in it. If a definition of freedom is such that it makes no sense why, for example, anyone would go to any length to have it, or have more of it, then to that extent such a definition is deficient. This is a method of analysis that is in the spirit of leftist conceptions of social justice but is also in keeping with the practice of ‘non-ideal theory’ as that has been described in recent literature.⁶

The aspect of this practice that I want to utilize is this: freedom must be defined in a way that explains its profound value, specifically why in some contexts having more freedom is of such grave importance for people. Just consider

⁴ Kramer 2003, 15. This is the core of Kramer’s view whose details are discussed at length in his book.

⁵ Though in Kramer’s case, such a function includes value qualifiers that measure freedom in part according to the importance of such freedoms to the agent. See Kramer 2003, 425–70. For discussion see Carter/Kramer 2008.

⁶ For a standard account of ideal and non-ideal theory, see Rawls 1971, 7–8; see also Sen 2011, 1–19. For a recent critical discussion see Mills 2005. The notion of non-ideal theory is quite flexible, however, and all I mean by it here is to assume that the social settings to which normative theory applies are marked by ongoing and historical injustices, such that one can consider the resonance of key normative concepts as used against this background.

the titles of so many protest songs, testaments to social and political struggles, and movements.⁷ One could consider all of these as merely the use of the term ‘freedom’ as a convenient synonym for ‘justice’, or one might think that this is a call for *specific* freedoms and that philosophical accounts should concern freedom overall. But these responses fail, I think, to capture the way that freedom language in these contexts refers to an aspiration for a particular state, namely a condition currently denied a group of people, and is used relatively consistently over a variety of contexts. It will be my contention that the positive view proposed below better captures such aspirations than the standard opportunity concepts just mentioned.⁸

For reasons very much related to this, standard opportunity accounts of freedom can be seen to be inadequate in these settings. In particular, the view of constraints as merely neutrally described barriers to possible actions (put in place by, or the responsibility of, other persons) fails to delineate the kinds of losses of freedom that motivate people to such forceful action (such as protests and resistance). If I live in a room that gets expanded by six inches I am thereby more free in the opportunity sense, since I can now walk in wider concentric circles inside its walls. All physical objects put in place by others, even those I can easily walk around, count as restraints since they prevent (even make impossible) my walking in a line that bisects the plane they occupy at the point they are located. While this is freedom in a sense, is it really the notion we want to capture when looking for that which people sacrifice so much to achieve? As Matthew Kramer admits, every new person that comes into existence manifests a gain of freedom for me in that he or she adds to the total number of conceivable actions I could engage in (in the new person’s company for instance), even if, as he says, such an addition is vanishingly slight (Kramer 2003, 425ff.). Again, viewing overall freedom in this way is perfectly respectable for some purposes, but for capturing the profound motivational force and value that freedom has in many contexts, this will not do.

As we will see below, this problem arises from seeing freedom as a function of purely external barriers, neutrally described. This position is taken in order to avoid what the theorists see as a *reductio* if we understand freedom as conceptually tied to agents’ desires. And while I think this danger of a *reductio* is exaggerated (or avoidable)—see below—it also deflects attention from what freedom *is* as opposed to what in part makes it possible. Opportunities allow

⁷ Examples of such language are ubiquitous: Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* and Martin Luther King calling the march to Selma the ‘Freedom March’ (and his invocation of freedom at the close of his famous ‘I have a Dream’ speech) are two of the countless number we could cite. This is not to say, of course, that all cases where ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ are invoked have the structure I attribute to it; in many cases, for example these words are simply stand-ins for what the users understand to be justice or a more just condition, whether or not such a use is at all supportable.

⁸ Defending this claim would involve a laborious explication of the countless uses of the language of freedom in social movements. My purposes here, however, need only rest on the contention that ‘freedom’ is a highly motivational concept as it is used across a wide variety of such social contexts. Also, note that saying an account of a concept must capture why it is of such great value for (most) people is different from defining it in terms of values. For critical discussion of the definitional relation of freedom and value, see Carter 1999, chapter 5.

people to act freely but what it means to be free has to do with the quality of the person's *agency*, or so I would claim.

For example, consider a person kidnapped and forced into prostitution while also being given addictive drugs. The person engages in prostitution under these conditions and becomes addicted to these substances. Then picture the situation of her being released from her kidnappers but given no relief regarding her addiction. Consider further that her (former) kidnappers are the only ready source of the addictive drugs in question, so that while she faces no actual constraints to the pursuit of activities other than prostitution, her addiction motivates her (virtually irresistibly so) to return to her captors and continue in prostitution.⁹

It seems clear that such a person is not (significantly) freer in the period after her 'release' even though she is no longer being coerced to perform sex acts and this clearly frees her from the external coercion this involved. Her options have indeed opened up, if those are defined by the standard of external constraints imposed by others. However, she lacks any capacity to pursue projects she minimally values or from which she is not deeply alienated, all because of her victimization by her captors.¹⁰ To utilize a conception of (negative) freedom that declares her state after her initial release as 'free' fails to capture why it would have been so valuable to her to be freed in the first place. Such an incomplete liberation would have been but an empty prize for her struggles against her captors.

Some defenders of negative notions respond to cases of addiction and brainwashing by including reference to 'internal' constraints that, they say, captures what is unfree about such persons but also keeps the idea squarely in negative territory. So the addict is constrained by her addiction, just as the prisoner is constrained by his cell bars (see, e.g., Kristjánsson 1996, 94–119; Kukathas 1996). But the problem with this move is that it lacks any motivation without a substantive account of what is being internally constrained, namely a positive capacity for authentic agency. Otherwise, why would we call an addiction a limitation on freedom but, say, a desire for food simply a part of human nature? Some people drink alcohol habitually as part of expressing who they are, while others drink the same amount out of compulsion and addiction. Calling the second case an instance of internal constraint can only rest on a positive account of authentic agency that is being undercut in the second case but not the first.

So we might focus on constraints when thinking about freedom, but in order to capture the profound value this has for people, we need also to focus on what the absence of these constraints make *possible*, namely effective agency itself.

These considerations, in part, are the motivations that drive us to look for a coherent and conceptually defensible notion of positive liberty. The pursuit of human, social freedom by those who consider themselves oppressed, or the

⁹ This overly brief description is a distillation of the stories of many trafficked individuals forced into prostitution. For a discussion of such cases, see Kristoff/Wu-Dunn 2010, chapter 2.

¹⁰ I mention this because, as I discuss below, positive conceptions of freedom can maintain a 'humanity constraint' requiring that one's lack of freedom must have a human source.

lack of freedom we find in conditions of deprivation and domination, cannot be understood adequately with the language of mere opportunity for neutrally described action types. Such a state involves other factors that must be named and characterized. That will be the purpose of the following section.

3. The Positive Dimensions of Freedom

What I have just suggested (all too briefly) is rather commonplace in the critical discussion of negative conceptions of freedom in the literature. Marx himself, for example, spoke of the ‘realm of freedom’ in ways that marked a contrast with the merely formal freedom of the alienated worker under capitalism.¹¹ Those in the Hegelian tradition also have developed alternative notions of human freedom that eschew the individualism of the liberal idea.¹² Charles Taylor, for example, famously decried the narrowness of negative conceptions of liberty (the ‘opportunity concept’) and proffered an alternative, ‘exercise concept’ of freedom (Taylor 1985). However, he argued that persons were free only insofar as they pursue their ‘strong valuations’—values that are grounded in independent and objective considerations independent of a person’s desires. For many, though, this view imports contestable value assumptions into the idea of freedom and fails to capture the non-specific value of liberty itself.¹³ What is needed, then, is a conception of positive liberty that remains relatively neutral regarding the various projects and values a person might adopt and hence represents a value in itself for the person independent of the value of those projects and values themselves.

Liberty has many dimensions, and the narrow opportunity account of traditional liberalism fails to capture many of them, or so I claim. Other theorists and traditions have highlighted other aspects, but I will focus on only some of these. Notice also that I am not proposing that the only true freedom is (the following kind of) positive freedom, or that purely negative liberty is incoherent or mistaken.¹⁴ Rather, I am claiming that there is an understanding of the idea of freedom that captures the discourse and motivations of socially deprived persons or groups that has positive elements, and hence in such contexts understanding liberty only in purely negative terms misses this important usage. For this reason, I do not claim that positive freedom should *replace* its negative cousin as the single or correct understanding of the concept, merely that there is

¹¹ Marx’s views on freedom are complex, and indeed there is debate about whether they remained consistent over time. For discussion, see Kandiyali 2014 and Walicki 1984. Also, for an argument that the charge of negative liberty as being ‘merely formal’ is overdrawn, see Carter 2011.

¹² In addition to the work of Hegel and Marx, one could also mention the work of T. H. Green. For discussion of Green’s views see Dimova-Cookson 2003.

¹³ See, e.g., Carter 1999, chapter 5. This might also be said of Marx’s view, in that his conception of the realm of freedom presupposed a ranking of activity such that only projects pursued after one is liberated from menial, alienated labor could count as free. (For discussion see Kandiyali 2014.) Insofar as this is a perfectionist account, my view departs from it, though I will return to the issue of alienation below.

¹⁴ For a conciliatory gesture in the other direction from a defender of a negative view, see Kramer 2003, 95.

a kind of freedom that goes beyond the absence of interference which functions in these socially important settings.¹⁵

As I mentioned at the outset, the two positive dimensions of freedom I want to discuss are *capacities* and *agent authenticity*. The former is meant to capture the idea that those who lack basic resources thereby lack a degree of freedom, something eschewed by the standard liberal notion. The latter refers to the ways in which one can lack freedom because of internal manipulations and socially structured psychic repression, such as the effects of racism, patriarchy, alienated labor, and so on. We will discuss these two dimensions in turn, though in general the picture being set out here is to view freedom more as *effective agency* rather than simply independence from coercion and interference.

To repeat: an emphasis on these positive features does not erase the relevance of non-interference to freedom. Indeed, one mistake that negative theorists make in criticizing positive notions is to assume that positive theorists, in Kukathas's words, are "not concerned fundamentally with the presence or absence of constraints upon individual action" (1996, 22). Depending on what is meant by 'fundamentally', this is inaccurate. For a defender of positive freedom need not think negative notions are incoherent or wrong-headed, but merely that they are *incomplete*. A positive account of liberty will include requirements of non-interference or non-constraint as a requirement of freedom, but (a) they will give a different account of what counts as a constraint and why its absence is important for freedom, and (b) explain why this mere absence cannot capture all of what freedom is when seen as something of fundamental personal and social value.

3.1 Capabilities

One of the longest standing objections to traditional liberal accounts of freedom is motivated by the idea that non-interference fails to account for the ways in which social deprivation and lack of resources can undercut liberty in a systematic way. The claim that freedom involves not merely the absence of interference but also a positive ability to form intentions and pursue actions has been much discussed, and I will only very briefly touch on it here. The idea that freedom requires certain powers and abilities as well as opportunities obviously picks up on Amartya Sen's requirements of agency freedom—the enjoyment of basic capabilities for formulating and pursuing valued functionings (Sen 1992, chs. 3–4). These include, for example, the absence of certain disabling conditions as well as access to various resources and social conditions that make decision

¹⁵ In this way, this approach avoids the critique voiced by Kramer and others that positive freedom carries untoward implications about what counts as a constraint (see Kramer 2003, 94–5). Only if one claimed that opportunity-freedom should be erased from our political vocabulary would this be a problem, for defenders of a view like mine can always say that in the negative sense, freedom is lost whenever a constraint appears, even if freedom in its positive sense is not (or vice versa). Moreover, I attempt in what follows to give what I take to be a plausible account of constraints viewed through the positive lens.

and choice feasible.¹⁶ The challenge for such a view is that to remain consistent with value pluralism and anti-perfectionism, the conception of capabilities must be subtle and flexible and not merely derived from an idealized conception of flourishing.¹⁷ For instance, the view should not imply that disabled individuals who have acclimated to their condition and whose environments are such that they are not significantly hampered by them are failing to lead flourishing lives simply because of the fact of their ‘disability’. My own view is that the list of basic capabilities will be derivative from the condition of ‘authenticity’ discussed below. Briefly, the idea is that the basic capabilities that comprise freedom for any individual will be those required for her to live a self-accepting life that she can call her own.

The challenge, then, is to formulate an account of capabilities which is consistent with a content-neutral account of effective agency, relatively speaking. That is, it must not depend on the agent having any particular set of values or commitments or pursue any specific kind of projects or relationships.¹⁸ This will be relativized to the individual, but for the purposes of social policy or broad social evaluations and critique, it will be permissible to generalize across persons to provisionally specify certain basic capabilities that can be taken to be required for agency for the population, subject to review and qualification if the list is shown to be inaccurate for certain subsets of that population.

This view has been developed and discussed in great detail (for an overview, see Robeyns 2011) and I want merely to make a relatively narrow point about it here. For example, some have objected that freedom-as-capability removes the unique character of freedom as a phenomenon and a value. For example, Carter argues that Sen’s view erases the unique, non-specific value that freedom is meant to have, since the value of agency freedom in Sen’s sense will always reduce to the value of the activities the person pursues in exercising it. To avoid this charge, a certain schedule of capabilities would need to be specified as embodying agency freedom (and others eschewed). But doing this will run afoul of the broad value neutrality of liberal political theory to which Sen and others are on record as being committed.¹⁹

I mention this charge because replying to it on Sen’s behalf will show the essential connection between capabilities and the other positive dimension of freedom I want to stress (authenticity). First, we should note that Sen defines capacities in ways that range over various valued functionings, so that capabilities include the ability to change and move within social options, deliberate about one’s choices, and turn intentions into actions. Sen emphasizes how the value of capabilities is fundamentally independent of the value of the outcomes

¹⁶ For an earlier defense of a conception of freedom that ties it to access to resources, see Crocker 1980.

¹⁷ This is to depart from any version of the capability approach that rests on an objective account of human flourishing, for example.

¹⁸ As I discuss below, complete content *neutrality* may be a misnomer (or at least an exaggeration) since some commitments may be incompatible with freedom but not because they are inherently evil or depraved but merely because they make the exercise of agency itself impossible. Certain overtly self-destructive projects would be examples.

¹⁹ See Sen 1985 and Carter 1999, 56–8.

they facilitate. Seeing freedom as a function of such capacities does not reduce the value of having that freedom simply to the value of any one such activity, he claims.

But to make this claim, we need not simply list the privileged set of capacities that, objectively speaking, contributes to an agent's well-being. We must characterize capabilities required for freedom from the particular agent's perspective. This is because effective agency in this sense, abetted by the exercise of these capabilities, makes the courses of actions pursued the agent's *own* in a special sense. No matter what the activities are, and hence independent of the value of accomplishing them for the person, doing something freely means *your* having done it, and not merely having something happen to you. This is the value of free agency itself, not merely what that agency results in.

As I said, this discussion of capabilities is overly brief but it was meant as an entrée into the more substantive dimension of positive freedom I want to defend, that of being enabled to pursue authentic projects as an effective agent in social space.

3.2 Authenticity

Another important point pressed by critics of traditional liberalism that bears consideration concerns the way in which social systems, and the power dynamics they involve, can pervasively oppress persons in ways that leave them alienated and dominated. Such phenomena, it is said, limit such persons' freedom in an important sense of that term.²⁰ Feminist theorists and activists, for example, have stressed the way social systems and dominant attitudes can so distort a person's value perspective so that they come to accept subservient and oppressive social roles for themselves (Hirschman 2003). In such cases, having independence from external interferences will not result in freedom for the person as long as what she chooses to do with that independence is shaped by these oppressive social forces in self-distorting ways.

However, one well-discussed danger of such judgments is that they rely on overly idealized conceptions of human flourishing in specifying what makes social conditions 'distorting' for the person. For example, many Marxists might say that workers under capitalism are structurally alienated by virtue of their place in the means of production and hence less free because such alienated labor denies full self-realization or denies them their ability to express their 'species being'. But to equate freedom with self-realization or one's essence as a member of the species is to assume a narrow and contentious conception of what a 'self' or human being truly is. For this reason, conceptions of freedom sketched along these lines have been rejected (see Berlin 1969).

For parallel reasons, liberal thinkers have objected to any conception of liberty that ties that notion (conceptually) to either justice or objective value.²¹ In

²⁰ For a classic statement of this charge, see Marcuse 1964.

²¹ See, e.g., Carter 1999, chapter 5. Those tying freedom to justice, indeed seeing freedom as derivative from the principles of justice, include Dworkin 1977 and Rawls 1971. Taylor is one of the most prominent thinkers tying freedom with (objective) value (Taylor 1985).

the former case, the general reason is that seeing freedom as part of or derivative from principles of justice implies that one cannot use reference to freedom as an independent reason to favor or reject a particular conception of justice. Moreover, equating freedom with what justice allows implies the seemingly absurd conclusion that those who are justifiably imprisoned are not (thereby) unfree (Kramer 2003, 97). Finally, liberals object to the conceptual link between freedom and objective value since it seemingly allows the dangerous specter of forcing the misinformed and vicious to be free by coercing them to follow the one true path. Pluralists and anti-perfectionists of all sort should worry about this alleged implication (Berlin 1969, 145–54).

What, then, can we salvage of this idea that one can become oppressed, and in that way un- or less free, by social alienation, brainwashing or ideology without importing a contentiously idealized conception of the person or of value? To answer positively, we must consider freedom as value-neutral or at least broadly invariant across a wide array of value commitments and conceptions.²² I do this by specifying that freedom involves the opportunity to pursue courses of action deemed minimally worthwhile according to one's *authentic* practical identity.²³

'Authentic' here is a somewhat clunky term that carries much baggage that I would like to shed, for example the idea that there is one true self that one must find and live up to in living a free life. Rather, I use the term to refer only to a procedural account of the development and maintenance of one's practical identity in a way that rules out being brainwashed, ideologically manipulated, or constrained by self-alienating life conditions. As I will specify (and have defended in greater length elsewhere),²⁴ a person is free when she can act on values that are her own in a minimal sense, as opposed to being inculcated into her by alienating and oppressive social conditions. Such a view avoids the untoward implications either of seeing freedom as self-realization or as relegated to the pursuit of objectively valuable ways of life.

To be more precise, an authentic practical identity in my sense is one that has developed in ways that allows the person to reflectively accept her values without self-alienation. If one were to repudiate, resist, or attempt to change these aspects of oneself in light of how they came about, one is alienated in my sense. So reflective (diachronic) self-acceptance is what I mean by authenticity. Hence freedom in the positive sense requires authentic self-acceptance in this way.

This implies that *insofar* as social systems and dominant ideologies shape character in ways that would produce such alienation, then people in these conditions are to that degree un- or less free. For example, in the case of women

²² The latter phrase is apposite because freedom may not be entirely 'neutral' in all its implications. In order for us to meet the methodological desideratum I set out earlier—that freedom refers to something of deep social value—there may be implications carried by the concept concerning why a free(er) life is a valuable one. What must be avoided, however, is that to be free means *holding* particular and contentious value *commitments*. The view set out here attempts to meet this standard.

²³ The ideas in this section are discussed in greater detail in Christman 2005.

²⁴ I do so in the context of a discussion of freedom in Christman 2005. I make similar points however in Christman 2009 in the context of a discussion of autonomy.

(and men) under dominant patriarchal social orders, I think, such judgments are quite plausible, and the ‘consciousness raising’ practices of feminists in the 1960’s and 70’s for instance indicate how people can discover their own deeply conflicted and alienated condition upon proper reflection. However, the view I present is not meant to vindicate any particular judgment about the freedom of people living in any specific social condition; it merely suggests a test for what would count for them to lack that freedom.²⁵

Now some theorists have rejected the requirement of autonomy for freedom in ways that may seem to indict the current proposal since it incorporates the idea of autonomy, in a minimal sense, into the notion of freedom. These writers argue that reflective self-direction is too strong a requirement for freedom since we often freely do things spontaneously and even stupidly. And insofar as autonomy requires actual reflective self-direction (and autonomy in this sense is a condition of freedom), we would lack freedom in these circumstances, a seemingly absurd implication (see, e.g., Kukathas 1996, 24).

But the condition of authenticity I am sketching here is far weaker than autonomy in this sense, as it does not require *actual* on-going self-reflection prior to action. One must merely be disposed to accept one’s actions and motivations *upon reflection*. That requirement is consistent with spontaneous and habitual actions that do not follow actual introspective consideration in every instance. It must merely be the case that, if we were asked why we did something for example, we could produce reasons or explanations that would not induce self-repudiation of the sort I describe. This is a condition closer to what some have labeled *autarchy* than autonomy in a full sense.²⁶

Moreover, while one need not actually reflect on every decision to be free in this sense, one must have the general capability to so reflect and to do so adequately. This means that one’s capacity to respond to reasons, consider options, and weigh personally important considerations in a minimally rational manner is also required for authenticity in my sense. I would further claim that for the reflection in question to speak for the agent (as opposed to merely moving the question of manipulation up to this higher level of reflection), the person must be able to reflectively accept her judgments over a variety of conditions and in light of relevant considerations.

In addition, tying freedom to one’s practical identity in this way will allow us to give a better account of what constraints should be counted as limitations on freedom. For unlike the neutral counting of standard negative models, a constraint only counts as such if it frustrates the successful performance of an action (or better, a course of action) deemed worth pursuing from one’s (authentic) practical perspective. We will return to this point presently.

²⁵ For example, I use the term ‘oppressive’ to refer to social conditions that have the effect of internal alienation I describe, but I am not claiming that oppression, in the sense of injustice, is part of the definition of freedom.

²⁶ I discuss a conception of autonomy that is much more detailed in Christman 2009 (though even in that case, spontaneous and unreflective actions can be autonomous).

More must be said about these conditions, but I and others have developed the idea in greater detail elsewhere.²⁷ The general idea is that freedom requires that one acts from motives that reflect one's non-alienated practical identity rather than dominant power structures and manipulative social forces. In saying this, we can now see how these positive dimensions can fit into an overall conception of freedom.

3.3 Positive Freedom in General

My proposal then is that freedom in these contexts should be understood as having the capacities and opportunities to pursue courses of action deemed worth pursuing from the perspective of one's authentic practical identity. We could say that actions that are at least minimally valuable from the perspective of a person's practical identity are 'eligible' for her. So one is free when one is not prevented (by obstacles whose presence can be attributed to other persons) from pursuing eligible courses of action and one has the requisite capabilities to engage in these actions.

This model has both negative (opportunity) components and positive elements. It also provides an independently motivated account of what counts as a constraint. Physical objects that (would) prevent bodily movements that would not even be considered eligible courses of action by the person do not count as constraints on this view. This is an advantageous aspect of the account on my view because it avoids the counting of trivial changes in one's physical environment as altering one's overall freedom as a social agent. This neither ties freedom to (merely) desires, nor is it value-laden in the sense thought by some to be problematic (as I discuss below). An evil person counts as free here as does a person failing to fully realize herself, as long as the practical identity that orients her values is not the product of alienation-producing processes.

Now while freedom is not here defined in terms of either justice or objective value, it may well be that appraisals of a person's overall freedom are a function of how deeply *she* values the (prevented) course of action. That is, what matters in judgments of freedom, we could say, is the centrality of the option to the person's authentic practical identity. That means that being robbed of the freedom to practice a religion for a committed devotee is more of a loss of liberty than being prevented from picking lint off my shirt (or any other trivial action). Indeed, options to pursue courses of action that have no value to me at all or are of negative value add nothing to my positive agency freedom.²⁸

This means, of course, that judgments of overall freedom are contextual and qualitative. This is because what counts as a constraint for any person depends on her self-defining values. Now we may well have to generalize over populations (based on input from members of those populations of course) to determine the

²⁷ See Christman 1992 and 2009 (though again, the latter is in the context of a theory of autonomy).

²⁸ Carter argues that this is counterintuitive (1999, 130–1.) But is it? If a door opens on a torture chamber, is it not natural to say that my overall freedom is unaffected by that new option? I realize that in saying this I am sliding from reference to a specific freedom, and its value, to overall freedom, but see below for a defense of this 'slide'.

importance of options for them in order to gain a general sense of the degree of freedom enjoyed or sought after in those contexts. This is to eschew the project that some liberal thinkers undertake in trying to determine an empirically respectable method for precisely measuring degrees of freedom for any population.²⁹ But such a project reduces to seeing freedom as nothing but neutrally counted action-opportunities, and whatever value there is in determining this measure, there is a separable and important project of articulating the kinds of freedom that people are so motivated to seek for themselves in contexts of oppression and deprivation, and agency freedom expresses that idea much better than does pure opportunity freedom.

Therefore, freedom in this context contains both negative elements (opportunities) and positive elements (capacities and authenticity). This, I suggest, better captures what motivates people who fight for their freedom in conditions of oppression and deprivation, and hence it makes better sense of the language of freedom in countless instances of struggle, rebellion, and strivings toward liberation (though I don't pretend that all such uses are well captured here). Such conditions of what could readily be labelled as oppressive are ones that prevent persons and groups from pursuing lives that they see as minimally dignified, worthy, and fulfilling, so fighting for freedom is not merely fighting for more breathing room, so to speak (that is, more opportunities to act *simpliciter*), it is fighting for these conditions of meaningful pursuit.³⁰

4. Replying to Some Standard Objections

Variations in the ideas developed here have been part of political thought in the Western tradition for ages, and so resistance to them has germinated in many forms. At least since Isaiah Berlin's seminal essay, doubts have been raised about seeing freedom in its positive form as a fundamental political value. Some of these doubts have been touched on above, and some don't apply to the view sketched here, but still, revisiting some (albeit selective) objections from this literature will help further clarify and motivate the current proposal.

In some cases, the objections simply miss the mark I think. For example, some liberal theorists have claimed that while liberty in the negative sense names a unique social or political value, positive liberty (in many of its guises) can too easily be replaced by perfectly acceptable synonyms such as 'ability' or 'autonomy' so that the terminology of freedom as such is rendered unnecessary.³¹ However, if a conception of liberty with positive elements best captures the way that term is used in dominant modes of political discourse, and best captures why people engaging in this discourse see it as a fundamental value, then its

²⁹ This is the central motivating idea for Carter in Carter 1999.

³⁰ Notice also that while most of these circumstances prevent these kinds of meaningful pursuits because they are unjust (and so the language of freedom in such places is deeply entwined with the language of justice), the model here sketched does not tie freedom to justice conceptually, so that it can make sense to say that such conditions are unjust precisely *because* they deny freedom in my sense.

³¹ See, for example, Kramer 2003, 96–7.

synonymy with other terms is beside the point. If this is what people mean by ‘freedom’ in important contexts, it is irrelevant if there are other terms to which this usage could in principle be reduced.

More substantively, many of those who defend pure opportunity views of freedom do so in part because they want to avoid any reference to a person’s *desires* in specifying what counts as a constraint. This is because such reference carries with it the untoward implication that a person can become more free not by a change in her surroundings but by a change in herself.³² That is, if constraints are defined in terms of what blocks a person from pursuing what she desires, then a person can merely take the Stoical turn of no longer desiring what is being blocked; a slave that simply ceases to desire liberation is not unfree, on such views.

This seemingly absurd implication has led defenders of these views to overreact, I think, and remove any reference to what a person might think is worth pursuing in specifying what freedom means. But this leads to the equally problematic view that any and all physical objects limit freedom (since they block actions that proceed through where they are physically located). An alternative approach of the sort I am developing here, however, would fix the reference of ‘constraint’ in ways that refer to a person’s evaluative perspective as a whole so that what counts as a constraint is an object or action that prevents a set of actions that the person would, at least minimally, think worth pursuing, given who the person she is, practically speaking. That is, from the perspective of her practical identity, the action sets in question are worth considering as possibly worthy of pursuit. This is not simply a desire, or something one can alter easily, but rather the very identity under which the person functions as an agent.³³

Viewing freedom as a function of courses of action minimally worth pursuing from one’s evaluative perspective avoids the ‘trivial counting’ problem I’ve been referring to, since mere physical objects don’t count as constraints if they do not prevent courses of actions I value. Moreover, this avoids the stoic objection as well. For while it is still the case that a person could, in principle, become more free by changing herself rather than changing the world, such a change would need to be *wholesale*—an alteration of her entire practical identity—and not merely a suppression of a single desire. So a person blocked from pursuing X is not positively unfree from doing X if X does not appear on her evaluative horizon at all. The reason we think it absurd that a conception of freedom would count a contented slave as free is that calling someone a ‘slave’ involves imagining cruel and pervasive limitations on her ability to lead a life worthy of her own self-respect and valuation. This difficulty of imagination is understandable, since virtually all slaves in the modern period were forced into lives they could not minimally value. So on the positive account they would never be counted as free. Only a person who so fully identifies with life pursuits for which the chains

³² Many have made this argument, though it originates in Berlin 1969. For an earlier response to it, see Christman 1992; for discussion of that response, see Carter 1999, 155–6.

³³ I use the term ‘practical identity’ in Christine Korsgaard’s sense. See Korsgaard 1996.

of slavery presented no significant limitations on her project would count as free, and there is very good reason to think such a person is hardly imaginable.³⁴

For example, there are devoted religious persons who spend their entire adult lives in prayerful contemplation or meditation in a single monastery or abbey. For such a person, the fact that a gate to the monastery is locked or not is irrelevant to her freedom to pursue any values that are eligible for her in my sense. Of course, she will lack the *opportunity* to leave if the gate is locked, but the positive freedom to pursue a course of life to which she is deeply identified is unaffected by such facts. In a similar way, my freedom is unaffected by whether or not I would be physically prevented from practicing a religion that involves praying to South American centipedes. Saying this does not merely bite the bullet in a standard counterexample but rather gives a richer and more plausible account of how we should characterize constraints.

Now I should point out that action clusters can be captured under a variety of descriptions. So that at some level of abstraction, certain pursuits may be of value to me—say being able to explore foreign modes of religious life without being judged or condemned—even if specific instantiations of them are not when described as such. My overall freedom will be a function of the freedoms to pursue such things at these different levels of abstraction. Which ones are most relevant to the question of my liberty will depend on their centrality to my practical self-understanding, as I discuss below.

Also, some have resisted the notion of positive liberty as a social value because they equate that notion with self-*realization* (Berlin 1969, 155ff.). However, one realizes oneself only if there is a self somehow to realize, namely an idealized description of the person according to which she enjoys and exercises her full potential. Self-realization, then, means coming to so enjoy and/or exercise those traits, and some have thought that freedom in its positive form amounts to this achievement. Indeed, some attribute this position to Marx (see Kandiyali 2014 for discussion). But the view developed here is not committed to the virtue of self-realization itself nor to equating it with freedom. While seeing authentic self-acceptance may have certain resonances with self-realization, I in no way assume that there is a self to be realized in acting according to one's authentically self-accepted motives. The view of authenticity sketched here is fundamentally proceduralist, so that one exhibits it if one came to have those motivations in a certain way; this does not mean that there was a pre-existing mode of being that can be attributed to one (as one's *essence* or *species being*) that is revealed by that process. We can be (and likely are) constructed by the process itself.

Also, the view here refers to authentic self-*acceptance*, not self-control or constant reflective self-direction (sometimes described as self-mastery). These latter phrases connote that we have the ability to fully control ourselves and our social situation, and that such control is not only desirable but is a requirement of freedom. But control over ourselves, especially if this means ongoing, reflective direction of our action under conditions we have made for ourselves, is as illusory as it is undesirable in many cases. Most of what I take to be central to my

³⁴ For an examination of this difficulty, see Hill 1973.

identity and character were neither chosen by me nor under my ongoing control. My body (type), race, childhood and parental legacy, birthplace, family history, love for those close to me, devotion to certain ideals, and so on are neither the product of any of my own choices nor things I can or would want to reflectively control (to a large degree at least). Now as I have argued, in order to be self-accepting I must be able to reflect upon and change anything about myself or situation from which I am *alienated*. But under the conditions of non-alienation, being self-accepting does not imply self-creation or ongoing self-control.

Finally, one of the most resonant criticisms of a view similar to one I defend here comes from Ian Carter and speaks to one of the most trenchant tensions in and around liberalism, and as such it picks up on issues raised in the Hegelian and Marxist traditions against views of liberty and agency in the liberalism of J. S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin. Carter considers a view of freedom that sees it as ranging only over options that are ‘meaningful’ for the agent. Freedom contributes to human well-being on this view insofar as the person is unobstructed in the pursuit of options meaningful to her. “Therefore”, Carter summarizes, “the instrumental value of freedom remains specific to those meaningful options” (Carter 1999, 53–4). This echoes the idea I defend here that says freedom is a function of options considered at least minimally valuable from one’s practical perspective.

But this position, on Carter’s view, “assumes too static an understanding of what is ‘meaningful’ [...] [f]or why should the relevant list of options be restricted to those that different agents *at present* see as meaningful?” He goes on, “part of this instrumental value is of a non-specific nature, given that we are unwarranted in ruling out any particular available actions as ‘non-meaningful’” (54). Part of the process of human growth is to pursue ‘experiments in living’ and the non-specific value of freedom comes from the open-ended capacity to pursue courses of actions that may seem absurd to us now but may reveal their value when we try them out.

This view cuts to the heart of debates between liberals and their critics about the nature and value of agency and its relation to tradition, identity, community, and the value of limitless choice. But the capacity to reflectively consider options other than those one currently values—even ones one considers absurd, horrific, or heretical—is not a costless character trait to develop; nor is it costless to promote as a social value. To say that one is open to reconsider commitments and see value in the option to reject them is to raise questions about the possible solidity of those commitments. A devoted religious person sees doubt as a *failing* and not merely mark of liberal open mindedness. Whether or not this is generally true, it is sincerely held to be so by people who define themselves in the deepest terms by those commitments, so that the (opportunity) freedom to reject them and consider alternatives to them is not a kind of freedom they see as valuable, and in fact may be considered dangerous.

Of course some of these world views that prize obedience and authority over reflection and choice are deeply problematic and simply eschew freedom as a value altogether. The view I am constructing here, however, is meant to capture the ways in which people find various options and ways of life ‘unthinkable’ in Frankfurt’s phrase (Frankfurt 1999) and do not experience a loss of freedom in

being unable or unwilling to consider them. I am no less free because I am physically prevented from torturing children for example.

Moreover, the view that all options have potential value because of possible changes of mind is easier to hold when one is in a position to already enjoy effective agency and a measure of social freedom. But for those fighting to escape social conditions that thoroughly deny them the ability to live dignified, meaningful lives with a degree of social recognition of their status as (equal) citizens, it is not the option to change that has unqualified value but rather the capability to pursue projects one already has in an accommodating social world. Freedom in those conditions gets its value from the possibility of (more) effective agency rather than simply having a broader menu of options beyond the scope of one's evaluative imagination. The resistant slave who is moved by religious faith, for example, will see freedom as the removal of shackles that prevent her from living a dignified life acting on that faith. Options to consider other quite foreign and alien religious perspectives will not be part of the conceptual structure of the freedom she aspires to.

Recall, however, that the word 'meaningful' here refers to options considered minimally valuable from the evaluative perspective of one's practical identity. The options not counted on this model are one's that are completely alien to one's entire value horizon, alien to who one is practically speaking. The array of options that get counted as relevant to freedom, then, is broad indeed, to be sure.

For these reasons, I suggest that the model of freedom that includes these positive elements better captures the meaning and value of freedom in the social contexts where that idea does the most discursive (motivational) work.

This admittedly brief and selective discussion of some of the reasons people have given to reject positive notions of liberty hopefully helps obviate some of the standard worries about this idea. Moreover, however, we began with an argument that seeing freedom in this light is the best way to capture what is valuable about it for those who lack it, as opposed to those already enjoying it and needing protection from intrusion. And we have come back around to this contrast in perspectives in this final section. For these reasons the voices to the 'left' of liberalism that express impatience with minimal opportunity-based accounts of liberty still resonate, especially in corridors filled with the sounds of struggle and resistance.

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