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Freedom

1.1 Introduction

Freedom, or liberty, is widely recognized as having huge importance.[1] The American *Declaration of Independence* says that we are all "created equal" with inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (United States 1776). Our freedoms are a foundation that political authority is built upon. However, if we should ask others what freedom is, there can be very different answers to questions about how it is defined and why it is valuable. So, what then is freedom? When can we be said to be free or unfree? Is freedom about our having options or in our achieving goals? How, if at all, can we justify any limits on freedom? This chapter discusses these questions.

We will begin by considering the foundational issue of how we might understand ourselves as "free." This is followed by examining the relevance of having choice and options. The chapter then surveys three broad theories of freedom: negative freedom, positive freedom, and republican freedom. We next consider the possible importance of our convictions about how we relate to others for any theory about freedom. The chapter concludes considering the issue of paternalism and how some claim we might justify constraints on freedom.

[1] I use the terms "freedom" and "liberty" interchangeably.

Political Philosophy: The Fundamentals, First Edition. Thom Brooks.
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It is worth noting that some of this discussion is abstract, or at least more so than later discussions on other topics in the following chapters. We will consider how we might know ourselves free and think about it using hypothetical examples that can seem anything but concrete at certain points. This book is aimed at students who are studying this topic for the first time. As we proceed, the process of thinking about freedom – as well as our other topics – will become easier as the reader becomes more familiar with the analytical approach taken. It goes without saying that if everything to know about freedom was obvious, there would be little point in having to explain different views that have been defended over the last few centuries. Indeed, it should be unsurprising that there is a diversity of views and longstanding debates over how we know we are free, what freedom is, and how it should be understood because the question of "what is freedom?" is essentially contested.

1.2 Knowing Freedom

When most students are asked about what freedom is, the issue of knowing whether *they* are free themselves is often overlooked. This is most likely because our freedom is presumed. The assumption is that we question *how* we are free, not *if* we are free, because we assume that we are. So, we rarely consider the matter of *if* we are free. So, let us start with this foundational issue.

Consider moving your hand or simply reading this sentence. How do you know that you are freely doing either action? Does it matter that you were asked to do it? Can you see these words and choose whether or not to understand them as they are read? Could you prove to somebody else that you, and only you, are choosing to freely move your hand – and that it was not predestined to happen nor under the control of nature nor a supernatural entity like God? Or are we under the control of our animal instincts? Is our freedom knowable, if it is possible?

These questions are abstract and difficult. Some might dismiss them as merely "academic" (in its usual pejorative sense) and claim the topic is unimportant because it lacks "real world" relevance. But, of course, it matters whether we are free or not in a practical sense. This is because our views on responsibility are often tied to our making free choices. If someone is not free to do something, we might not hold them responsible for whatever happens. It is important to know *that* we are free — and not only *how* we might be free.

The 18th-Century German philosopher Immanuel Kant addressed this issue. He was interested in understanding what the use of our reason could achieve and its limitations. Kant considered various thought experiments, including about the nature of freedom. His thought experiments are meant to show how we might best understand complex issues, such as whether or not we are free.

For example, Kant asks us to first consider the assumption that we are free. This is understood to mean the idea that we are *the cause* of our own activities.[2] This means that we are free when we act autonomously, such as when our hand moves because we intended to make it move in a particular way that we choose. Or that we walk briskly or stop and stand still depending on whichever way that we happen to choose to do it. In these ways, we are free where the choice is ours and we enable that choice to happen. We act freely when exercising our "free will" (O'Connor and Franklin 2022).

Imagine that you are playing soccer. A teammate passes you the ball. You rush forward towards the opposing team's net, kick the ball hard, and score a goal in the last minutes of the match. It is easy to imagine your teammates congratulating you for scoring. We can make sense of this if we understand that *you* are responsible for *your actions* and so acted freely. Your goal scoring is your achievement. It was not caused by anyone nor anything else. Assuming that you are free, it makes sense to congratulate you for what you did.

Now consider the same activity from a different point of view in comparison. Imagine that we are *not* the cause of our own activities. Instead, every action happens according to the laws of nature – or at the choosing of an all-powerful God.[3] When you receive the soccer ball, run down the pitch and kick it into the opposing net, it is your foot that touches the ball that scored the goal, but this was not caused by your free will; instead, it was predestined to happen, a natural reaction or the invisible hand of an almighty deity. Congratulating you for this event makes no sense in this context. You are instrumental to the goal – it was your foot that kicked the ball – but the cause was beyond you and, most importantly, *not* you. The goal is not an achievement of yours and so to celebrate you for making it happen would be to reward you for an achievement that was not yours.

[2] Kant (1998: 484 [A444, 446/B472, 474]). The citations in brackets are the commonly used format in referencing Kant's work and used for this and his other words references.

[3] Kant (1998: 485 [A445, 447/B473, 475]).

This is the problem of free will: namely, how might we know we are free, if we are free? Many students will say that to imagine we are not the cause of kicking a ball or even reading this sentence does not make sense either. But this is Kant's point. His argument is that it seems improbable that we can prove through rational argument alone that we are (or are not) free. The use of our "pure" reason can only get us so far. Consider another hypothetical example. If a mischievous wizard, in a magical cave many miles away, was secretly controlling your movements and influencing your thoughts, we act at the wizard's bemusement without knowing that he is the true cause of what we do; in other words, we are unfree. So, how could we ever conclusively prove with complete certainty that this secret control of our mind and body is impossible? Or if you do not like wizard examples, suppose it is an alien with these powers controlling you from a distant planet unknown to humanity. How could you rationally prove its impossibility?

We have a situation where we cannot prove with perfect certainty either one side (we are free) or the other (we are not free). Kant calls this an *antinomy of reason*.[4] This antinomy is an example, he argues, about where our reason alone cannot prove or disprove our actions are a cause of our freedom or a product of nature and unfree. Our use of reason alone brings us to a philosophical fork in the road. It may seem unclear which path we should take and why.[5] We might all accept the philosophical fork in the road and agree that there is only one road to take. When we imagine a world where we are generally free or unfree, Kant argues that only a world where we are understood to be free – and our freedom is thereby *assumed* – can we make the best *coherent* sense of our world. If we assume our freedom and consider individuals as free, then it makes the best sense for us to congratulate them for great achievements or blame them for terrible wrongs.

A world without freedom is a world without praise or blame. It is a world where life might not make much sense at all. If whatever happens to us is never our achievement, then it would not make sense to see any merit or demerit in the actions of others. Whether someone passes a test, gains a qualification, performs unsuccessfully at a job interview, or kills others unprovoked in cold blood would all lack ethical meaning.

[4] Kant (1998: 486, 489 [A448, 451/B476, 479]). An antinomy is a contradiction between two beliefs or conclusions that are themselves reasonable. In this case, the reasonable exercise of pure reason that I am free or that I am unfree creating a paradox.

[5] A similar antimony is described famously by the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi. He said that he dreamt he was a butterfly fluttering about conscious only of his happiness as a butterfly. On awakening, he claims that he did not know whether he was a man who had dreamed about being a butterfly or now a butterfly dreaming about being a man.

These actions would be things that happen because they do; they just happen as mere happenings. There is no rationale to explain why.

Kant argues that we should assume *that* we are free to make best sense of our world.[6] We assume our freedom in praising others for achievements or blaming them for committing wrongs. We celebrate a goal scored because we see it as an action caused by the free choice of the goal scorer. Or we punish wrongdoers who deliberately harm others precisely because their harm can be understood as the outcome of their choices. These assumptions may make intuitive sense, but it might leave some readers perplexed by the idea that our freedom might only be assumed, but not proven.

But there is an alternative view. It says that we can know we are free when our freedom is mutually recognized as such, as acting freely – and so thereby not merely assumed. This position is defended by G. W. F. Hegel, a 19th-Century critic of Kant (Brooks 2013a, Hegel 1990: §15R).[7] Hegel takes a different view about how we might discern freedom. He describes his view as showing how "the free will wills the free will" (Hegel 1990: §27). This is the idea that we have a free will, but it is only free when it is freely willing some outcome.

The first step is to distinguish the making of a free choice from an arbitrary choice. The former is a product of reflection and thought. Our choice is, to some degree, controlled by us. The latter is we simply following wherever our desires or passions may take us. Hegel saw this distinction between free choice and arbitrariness as a defining difference between humans and animals, as animals were enslaved by their passions and how they feel at any given time. They eat when hungry, flee when scared, and sleep when tired. These activities are not free because they are arbitrary, as actions dictated to animals by whatever feeling that they happen to have at a particular moment.

We, as human beings, are different from the animal world. We have the ability to control our passions. We can reflect on what we do before choosing what to do, rather than merely follow wherever our desires take us whenever they happen to arise within us. For Hegel, this view of what makes us human also helps define us as free versus

[6] This view is called transcendental idealism because it makes a leap of faith in assuming our freedom.

[7] References to Hegel's work are to the section (§) and use common abbreviations of "R" for Remark and "A" for Additions to those sections. This is the standard referencing for his work. The "Additions" are from the notes of his students supplementing Hegel's texts from the students' notebooks. While Hegel is notoriously described by many as among the most complex and difficult of canonical Western philosophers, I can promise readers that a sustained engagement with his work is enormously rewarding and well worth the effort. Any reader wanting to know more should contact me.

animals as unfree because arbitrary decision-making is, for Hegel, a lack of freedom and not its exercise.

The second step is to see freedom as having an essentially *social* dimension. If only human beings have the capacity for freedom, then – for Hegel – only human beings have the ability to determine when decisions are free or not. We might each believe that we act freely in making a choice. However, this is only a subjective opinion by itself, or at least until we acquire a more objective view through the mutual recognition of our freedom by others. An object or decision is freely mine when recognized by others as mine. We achieve mutual recognition with others when we both recognize others as free and *vice versa*.

Hegel accepts that requiring such mutual recognition of others in society may be a "struggle" at times (Hegel 1990: §57R). Individuals may have different views. But, for Hegel, this is a difficulty we must face. If everyone did however and whatever they pleased, we could not distinguish what is freely chosen from what is arbitrary. Our behaviors might bear more resemblance to the animal kingdom than the reasonableness that defines human conduct. It is only through the recognition of our actions as free (or not) by others who share our capacity for freedom that provides a more objective view. We require others – and they require us – to discern, determine, and develop our freedom in social cooperation together.

The final step is to consider our freedom in context. Our choices are not made in a vacuum nor a utopia, but in the world. The conditions we find ourselves in are often nonideal to varying, sometimes extreme, degrees. For example, Hegel acknowledges that how we view rights and wrongs may change according to "the condition of civil society" (Hegel 1990: §218). We may judge similar events differently if the circumstances are different, but we seek to form a coherent view from what we have. Hegel illustrates this point by saying that we may punish crimes more harshly where our state is in civil unrest or at war and so "a penal code is therefore primarily a product of its time and of the current condition of civil society" (Hegel 1990: §218R). We will consider this view later when examining punishment in Chapter 6. But it is worth noting that if recognition by others is critical for providing some objective basis for determining whether we act freely or not in doing right or wrong, the context within which rights and wrongs are considered is significant and adds further complexity.

Critical readers may consider that group judgments are not always free from error, which of course is true. Just because most may believe something to be true does not make it true. Therefore, there remains an ongoing debate of interest about how we know we are free, whether we

are persuaded more by Kant's or Hegel's approach, and how much we are convinced by their attempts at making coherent sense of freedom.

1.3 Contemporary Freedom

When we think of freedom, how do we think about it? The 18th-Century philosopher Benjamin Constant identified two different approaches. Constant called the first the *freedom of the ancients* (Constant 1988). This freedom refers to the time of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire about 2000 years ago. Constant claims that freedom was understood at that time in a distinctively non-individualistic way at that time two thousand years ago. Philosophers did not talk about *my* freedom, but instead of *our* freedom as a community, such as a city. Freedom was secured by groups, for groups, and as a group.

This view of the ancients is in contrast to what Constant calls the *freedom of the moderns* that we enjoy today. Constant's idea of modern freedom is understood as the freedom of only individuals, not collectives. We talk today about *individual* freedom for ourselves and no longer the freedom of some group.

Constant claims this distinction helps us think about freedom in at least two ways. First, we should be aware that philosophers have thought about freedom differently over history. When we see the word "freedom," it has not always been understood the same way over time: the ways in which classical thinkers conceived of freedom has changed to how we understand it today. We should therefore be sensitive to how the meaning of this concept has developed over time.

Second, Constant claims the shift from the seeing freedom as relating to the community toward it becoming related to individuals is an irreversible change. He claims that there is no going back from this individualistic view of freedom once it has taken hold. In this way, Constant captures the dominance of liberalism that emerged from his time with its emphasis on individual liberty. Wherever it has taken root, *how* we think about individual freedom may change, but not whether individual freedom has special importance. This is a lasting insight from Constant on an essential feature of modern liberty.

While there are many different views about what freedom is today that we will examine, they all have in common the view that being free requires *individual* autonomy (Raz 1986: 369–370). Thus, to be free is to be autonomous to some degree. The implication is that if we

lack autonomy and the ability to control our lives, then we lack a capacity for exercising freedom. This is true for any view of freedom, an important contribution to how we understand contemporary theories about freedom thanks to Constant's insights.

1.4 Choices and Options

We have only discussed the abstract matter of whether I can be free and how I might know this – either through an assumption or mutual recognition. If I *can* be free, how *might* I be free? This is a question about knowing when freedom might be exercised, if I am free and autonomous. It is a matter of whether or not freedom requires our having a choice of options.

For example, it might be argued that freedom requires a choice. If I have only one option and no alternatives, it could be said that an individual had no choice but that one available option. We are free only where there are two or more options to choose from. To use our free will, we require the opportunity to exercise it. Let us examine this view.

So, what if you did have two options to choose from, but one of them is too awful to pick? Imagine you are at a bank waiting to withdraw money. A thief pulls out a gun and demands that you hand him your money or you will be shot dead. It might be argued that we had no choice but to agree to the thief's demands. Probably about all of us might say the same if in that situation. While we have the options to either hand over the money or refuse to comply with the armed thief, this second option of refusal might be thought to be too awful to pick because it could mean our instant and unlawful death. A choice of compliance or death is like a deal that we can hardly refuse, especially given the significant consequences for us if we did refuse.

In a famous passage from his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes considers a hypothetical example of a sinking ship (Hobbes 1996: 146).[8] Imagine you are on a ship that is sinking fast and far out at sea. The only way for those on board to survive and avoid drowning is to throw the ship's precious cargo overboard however valuable it might be. Only if all such cargo were lost at sea might our ship avoid sinking and so make it safely to shore. Otherwise, all will drown. We might claim that we had no

[8] In my view, this passage is not famous enough and a great issue to discuss in philosophy seminars!

choice, or at least not a genuine choice worth making, as one of the options is too awful to pick: namely, to hold onto the cargo and go down with the ship. Our only choice is to save our own lives by ridding the ship of its cargo because otherwise all lives would be lost if we did not.

Perhaps surprisingly for most students, Hobbes disagrees with that view. He claims that we *are* free because there *is a choice*. For Hobbes, it does not matter that we like the choices we have so long as we do have options. The bare fact that we have *any* choice, even if the only alternative option is too awful for us to pick, is sufficient to make us responsible for whatever choice we select. It might be that everyone would dump the cargo overboard to save their lives if in the same position. That would not indicate we were unfree in Hobbes' view, but, instead, merely tell us that we are exercising our freedom in the same ways. We are likewise free to disobey the law even if, from the fear of punishment, we refrain from doing so. The fact that a choice is bad or repugnant is only relevant for thinking about how we exercise our freedom when choosing between alternatives, but the bare fact we have a choice means that we remain free either way. Hobbes' example of a sinking ship helps us reflect on whether mere options should be sufficient for freedom or whether options worth choosing are required.

Now consider a very different example. Would it matter that we had only one option if that is the only choice we want? Harry Frankfurt considers the following hypothetical scenario (Frankfurt 1971). Imagine there is a so-called happy addict. This person has an unbreakable dependence to highly addictive narcotics that must be supplied constantly. While the individual is unable to act differently and stop taking these drugs, suppose that they would continue to use them even if they could choose to do otherwise. The happy addict is someone who has only one option, but might still be thought free. Does it make sense to say they act freely despite having no other choice so long as the only choice that they have is the one they want?

One possible response might be to say that, while freedom may be about doing what we want in some sense, it is also about having the freedom of will to choose what we want. The happy addict lacks the capacity to choose otherwise and so is unable to make a free choice – irrespective of whether they might claim they would only choose a certain way. So, we might argue that we are free even where we have only a single option, but *only* so long as we have the *capacity* to consider how we might exercise freedom and if the option we have is what we would choose whether or not other options were available.

The happy addict is not free in this sense. While they might claim their only option of continually using narcotics is what they would choose, their actions are directed by their addiction and not a result of reflective choice as they do not have the capacity to consider other possibilities if they were could be options. On the contrary, suppose you are at a market and the only item for sale is the one object you want.[9] Would you think that you are any less free because you had less choice even if the option you do have is the only one you desire at all times? This raises the distinction between freedom-as-having-options versus freedom-as-option-preference. The first claims freedom is about the fact of available options whereas the second argues freedom is achieved where we have the option we would choose anyway, even if other possible alternatives are unavailable.

The key problem here is autonomy. If I am unable to make a choice, I lack the capacity for autonomous control and, by extension, I am unfree. Moreover, it is important for freedom that what I can choose is worth my choosing it (Raz 1986: 381). If my only options are what is required for bare survival, it is unclear that there is any autonomous choice (and, therefore, no freedom). This is true whether I am coerced by the threat of death from the wrongful conduct of another or natural causes.

Freedom requires our autonomy, even more than our options for expressing it. When our autonomy is constrained or coerced, our freedom is restricted or denied.

1.5 Theories of Freedom

The discussion thus far has been pitched at a very abstract level concerning the issues of *if* we are free and *how* we might know it. In this section, we consider the three broad theories of how freedom has been defined traditionally. These are negative freedom, positive freedom, and republican freedom. Each will be considered separately before turning to a challenging problem for all three views that is presented where individuals feel they lack freedom because they are

[9] The example is not a perfect analogy as you might not wish to purchase anything. But suppose you are incredibly hungry, perhaps at near risk of starvation, and suffer from having severe allergies so have very restrictive dietary requirements whereby eating the wrong foods can be potentially fatal. Imagine the one thing on sale at the market is not only a food that you have no allergic reaction to, but is your favorite of all foods. Consider whether in this situation are you free with only the one choice?

alienated from others. These different views about freedom offer a variety of ways to understand how our autonomy is relevant to freedom – whether as unconstrained (negative), as achievements (positive) or as non-domination (republican).

1.5.1 Negative Freedom

One way of defining freedom is as negative freedom. A classic definition is by Thomas Hobbes, who says (in 17th-Century English): "liberty . . . consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do" (Hobbes 1996: 146). In other words, freedom consists in our *not* being constrained by others to do whatever we want to do. Notice how freedom is understood in a generally *negative* way: freedom is defined by an absence of interferences, where we are *not* being encumbered or otherwise constrained. Where the laws do not prohibit us, Hobbes says that every individual may act "according to his discretion" (Hobbes 1996: 152). If we are not interfered with, we are free to do as we like. Freedom is being free from such constraints.

A broadly similar way of defining negative freedom in more contemporary language is found in Isaiah Berlin's famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty." He argues:

> I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others . . . You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings (Berlin 1969: 122).

Berlin defends freedom negatively as our *not* being prevented by others from pursuing some end. We lack freedom when we are unable to do as we like by other people. The key to unlocking whether or not we are free is whether others prevent our desired pursuits, and not whether our chosen goals are worth pursuing. Whether or not our goals are valuable or not in some objective sense is irrelevant – they need only be goals that we wish to pursue. In short, it is not what we do, but whether we are restricted from doing it that matters when determining if we are free.

Negative freedom has been a very popular way of understanding freedom, in part, because it appeals to a powerful intuition that being free is being unconstrained. Negative freedom's advocates can say that someone handcuffed or tied to a tree is unfree because another

person has interfered with their movement and constrained them. They would only become free if not handcuffed or untied and so unfettered. Being free is being free from interference.

But this intuition runs into some possible difficulties. One is where we are prevented from doing something, but not because another individual is blocking us. For example, suppose you are walking through a park and seek to cross over a hill. However, the winds sweeping across the park are so strong that you are unable to climb up the hill. You are prevented from pursuing a goal and there is an obstruction, the wind, blocking your path. So, are you unfree to continue walking through the park? It might seem so as you cannot go past the hill in front of you. But negative freedom only counts constraints on your liberty where it is imposed by another person. According to Berlin's view, interference is defined as something others do to you. So, for Berlin, you would appear free to walk through the park despite your being unable to actually move forward in it – which seems intuitively implausible.[10]

Or imagine that you wish to attend a school to be educated. However, the school requires its pupils to pay upfront and this amount is more than you can afford. Nobody is directly preventing you from attending the school: if you had the money, you could start immediately. You are not interfered with. Or suppose the school is a distance away that is too far to reach and attend each day. Nobody is stopping you from attending – and further suppose there are no school fees so there is no cost. In both cases, you cannot pursue a goal because barriers are faced, either financial or geographical. It may seem odd to say that you are free to attend either school despite being unable to actually do so in reality because of affordability or distance. In these cases, there are obstacles which block you from receiving an education, but you are not interfered with by others. Should we say you are free to do what you cannot achieve, as a negative freedom proponent might claim? This seems counterintuitive.

1.5.2 Positive Freedom

A second way of defining freedom is positive freedom. This is the idea that we are free when we achieve some goal or end worth achieving. Positive freedom defines freedom *positively* in terms of what you can or may *do* or *achieve*. We are free insofar as we accomplish some goal or end.

[10] Our intuitions can play an important role in helping us weigh arguments. What do your intuitions in this example highlight for you about whether someone is free or unfree?

The classic definition of positive freedom is by the 19th-Century philosopher T. H. Green. He says freedom is “a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying” (Green 1986: 199). This entails two important caveats. First, freedom is about what we can do. If we seek to walk across a park or wish to receive an education, we are only free if we can do it. If strong winds or prohibitive costs prevent us from achieving these goals, then we are not free – and whether or not anybody is trying to stop us. Our focus is not on who, if anyone, is setting obstacles like negative freedom does; but, instead, we focus on whether we are able to achieve our goals. Positive freedom emphasizes outcomes.

The second important caveat is that positive freedom is about the achievement of outcomes “worth doing or enjoying” only (Green 1986: 199). It matters which goals we choose. We might argue that worthy goals include the pursuit of a good education, for example. For Green, this means that the state must support conditions that allow us to exercise this freedom, if we wanted to do so.[11] This does not entail that the state must deliver education or that all schools must be state run. But it does mean that the state is required to support our pursuing goals worth doing or enjoying, and this could involve delivering some services as a public good, as it would promote our freedom. So, positive freedom is not about our ability to do anything, only the ability to do things worth doing.

What is potentially counterintuitive for some critics is that a consequence of positive freedom is that the state may play a necessary role in promoting our freedom. If true, then this would be very different from negative freedom where the actions of others may be viewed as obstructions to freedom. Often we might think of ourselves as free when not constrained by state action (like under negative freedom) rather than free when this is enabled by state action (under positive freedom). However, it is unclear that the state must be large and active in our lives in a negative way. For instance, Green was himself famously a liberal whose ideal of a community of rights prioritized individual pursuit of the common good instead of an activist state (Simhony 2003).

In addition, if we can identify suitably worthy goals, such as education, that positive freedom should promote, it raises questions about whether we are really free to choose to pursue it – or whether we lack

[11] For important discussions about Green’s theory of freedom, see Dimova-Cookson (2003) and Simhony (1991).

the choice to choose valuable goals for ourselves. For example, if education is "worth doing or enjoying," it might appear to create an obligation on us to pursue it.

This raises the further question of who decides which ends are valuable for pursuing? Positive freedom is about worthy goals that our state or community must facilitate our ability to achieve. So, who is it that chooses what is a worthy goal that will be facilitated for us? This concern echoes the perhaps ironic comment from Jean-Jacques Rousseau that individuals might be "forced to be free" (Rousseau 2011: 167; see Brooks 2005; Orwell 1954: 6). As Constant argued above, the freedom of the moderns is the freedom of individuals. This would appear to entail that it is for individuals, not collectives, to choose their own goals for what individuals within a community might seek to achieve as most of positive freedom's proponents claim.

A further criticism of this view is raised by Berlin against Green's positive freedom. Berlin says: "everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience" (Berlin 1969: 125). Berlin's argument is that when positive freedom advocates argue that all should be able to pursue some particular "worthy" goal, this confuses the concept of freedom with other concepts like equality. Berlin claims there may be good reason for the state to ensure all can achieve certain goals, such as education, but this is not about fostering freedom but rather the promotion of other values like equality. There is nothing unique about values coming into conflict: it may be that requiring all to be educated is a restriction on freedom, insofar as not everyone may want it. For Berlin, a problem with positive freedom is its inability to make such a distinction by confusing freedom with the pursuit of equality.[12]

1.5.3 Republican Freedom

A third way of defining freedom is republican freedom. This view is "republican" named about a view of freedom found originally in ancient Rome. It is not the republicanism of any contemporary political

[12] It is worth noting that it is not always clear where the lines should be drawn. For example, in the next chapter we will consider rights, which some conceive as protecting freedoms. If true, perhaps not every freedom is protected by rights, but in many cases it may be difficult to distinguish between violating the freedom of another from violating the rights of another.

party like the Republican Party in the United States – and they should not be confused with each other.

Republican freedom is defined by Philip Pettit quoting the *Letters of Cato*: "Liberty is, to live upon one's own Terms; Slavery is, to live at the mere Mercy of another" (Pettit 1999: 33). Republicans define freedom as non-domination. Its classical opposite was tyranny. The tyrannical dictator exercises domination over others by enforcing laws over others at any time and in any way, in a manner that may appear alien and arbitrary to those under the tyrant's rule. The people have no say over how they are governed and their domination defines their unfreedom. Republican theories understand freedom as being free from domination.

Republicanism can be seen as occupying a space somewhat in between negative and positive freedom. Republican freedom agrees with negative freedom that to be free is to be uncoerced by others – our lives are to be lived on our own terms. However, republican freedom is also different because coercive measures can be acceptable if we agree to them and so still live on our own terms. For example, all countries criminalize murder backed by severe penalties, including life imprisonment or even capital punishment. The state coerces us to avoid criminality, but does this mean that this kind of coercion must restrict our freedom? For republicans, it does not. The issue is not whether the state coerces *per se*, but whether the state coerces in a way that dominates. Provided that the state's coercive power does not arbitrarily impact on me, then its power does not limit my freedom. Instead, it helps mark out recognized limits of my freedom.

In this light, republican freedom also agrees with positive freedom that to be free is to achieve certain goals. But there is a difference. Whereas positive freedom advocates defend the achievement of goals as ends, such as access to education, republican advocates defend the achievement of goals *as a process*. This process is inclusive community deliberation over our public affairs. For example, Pettit claims we must each share discursive control over decisions that may have an impact on us (Pettit 2001: 65–103). We participate in discursive control by being a part of the public conversation, such as engaging in how the community is governed. When we can take part and help shape our laws, for example, they are not arbitrary constraints on the exercise of our freedom. Instead, they demarcate the recognized boundaries between what we are free and not free to do. Republican freedom as non-domination is not the absence of law or governments, but where

law and government are shaped by the governed. In other words, the people determine the laws that they co-create and not *vice versa*.

Sometimes it is claimed that republican freedom is indistinctive from other theories. For example, negative freedom is based on non-interference while republicanism is grounded on non-domination. It may be true that when I am not interfered with by others that I am also not dominated by others. Both theories may appear to justify the same position. Republicans reject this view claiming that I am not necessarily free if not interfered with. For instance, if others do not constrain me physically, they may dictate my future politically or economically by denying me a voice or a vote. Therefore, I can be dominated even if not interfered with and so, for republicans, their theory is different.

Republicanism might also be accused of being very close to positive freedom. Positive freedom advocates the achievement of certain goods, such as being able to obtain an education or access to health care. It could be argued that non-domination is compatible with being able to secure valuable ends like education or access to health care. The difference that republicans might point out is that positive freedom is about the *end* to be achieved whereas republicanism is about the *process* used to achieve ends. Non-domination features in *how* we engage with others deliberating about our democratic future. It does not set out *what* should be secured after a deliberative process, suffice to say it that the non-domination within a well-run process is thought to help legitimate whatever is agreed. But the focus is on how we come to a view rather than, as per positive freedom, what that view should be.

A further concern is with regard to republicanism and children (Brooks 2025b). Republicans claim that domination is an evil to be avoided and contrary to freedom. Yet, parents exercise authority over their children determining when and what they might eat, how they are educated and more. It would appear that republicans would find children unfree and, indeed, republicans in ancient Rome thought exactly that. If true of contemporary republican thought, it would undermine their claim to oppose domination in all forms.

However, republicans demanding discursive control are clear that there need not be interaction every time. The importance of deliberation is that such opportunities exist and that I can effectively participate in them, not that I must always participate at every such available opportunity. In this way, republicans might argue that so long as parental authority over children is normatively restrictive with a goal

of supporting autonomous development and where these restrictions increase further over time as children transition to teenagers and young adults, there are not dominated but enabled to become civic republicans. Such a perspective on freedom and children may relate to other views of freedom, too. For example, negative freedom advocates opposed to interference do not claim it is *never* justified to interfere with the freedom of another in any situation, such as where there is an imminent danger and risk to life. In these cases, parents may justifiably raise children without denying their freedom, but rather enabling it (Brooks 2025b). Noticeably, there is importance placed on the development of an individual's autonomy for freedom in both cases suggesting common ground between different conceptions about freedom, at least in some areas.

1.6 Are Different Theories About Freedom Compatible?

These three views about freedom – negative, positive, and republican – dominate discussions in political philosophy today. It is easy to see why as each seems to focus on something about how we think about freedom and its value. Negative freedom seems to get right the idea that our being *free* to do something requires our ability *to do* that something. If we are constrained by another, then we lack the ability to act. This may limit our exercise of freedom. However, nobody thinks that we are free to do *anything*.[13] There are necessary limits where others may rightfully constrain us from doing something. For example, it is often claimed that our causing harm to others (or even harming ourselves) creates a limit on how we might exercise freedom. This creates a difference between being able to murder or steal, but not being *free* to murder or steal, as this would wrongfully cause harm to others.

Our freedom to do something is limited by obvious constraints of reasonable feasibility. For instance, we are not free to run faster than any car or travel unaided across the galaxy, as such activities are unreasonable and unfeasible. Strictly speaking, we are no more free

[13] When a student might suggest in my philosophy seminars that freedom is about being able to do whatever you want, I would raise the issue of vampires: if someone believed that they were a vampire, would they be free to bite strangers along the high street? Students never see such an example coming! While an absurd hypothetical case, it can get students out of their dogmatic comfort zones and engage with not only which theory of freedom they find most plausible, but also its normative limits.

than what we might be free to do or not do some activity. Some activities might be beyond our reach, such as to access adequate health care or obtain an education for various reasons, such as our having a lack of resources. In such cases, our freedom to obtain an education might be reasonable and feasible if resources are available to us and we are treated equally by the state. Some, like Berlin, as we have seen, might view this as more of a case about the balance between freedom and equality or social justice – and not about freedom alone. But a freedom that only allowed a choice beyond our possible reach seems to miss something valuable about freedom: namely, that the value of freedom is, in part, the value of what freedom may realize. Positive freedom's defenders seem to get right that freedom is not about being free to do anything at all and freedom involves a kind of achievement, even if different philosophers might understand freedom's realization in different ways.

It might be noted that an authoritarian state could also achieve these goods (Brooks 2002c). Lacking freedom to choose unhealthy foods could help ensure that we live longer and compulsory education through earning a qualification at university might create a better-educated public. The only hitch is no one would have a say about their health or how they were educated. Republican freedom theorists seem to get right that freedom requires our not being dominated by the decisions of others and so ensure that we have opportunities to contribute to help determining public policy outcomes. Freedom is about being free to do some things, but not anything: *freedom is a pursuit of what has value, that we are autonomously free to do and what is possible to achieve*.[14] Our

[14] I note a more radical conception of freedom along these lines that can be traced to the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre that may interest readers. For Sartre, "not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be . . . Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre 1957:15). I am free when I autonomously choose for myself. This helps renders my choices as valuable because they are chosen by me. It may be obvious that how and what I choose in a world of scarcity will be constrained by the activities by others. Sartre claims this constraint is more wide reaching as simply being in the gaze of another can constrain my freedom to be. For example, I may conceive of myself as wise, funny and good natured; but this may not match the perceptions held by others over which I cannot control and, in turn, they restrict my freedom to be especially where others hold a contrary view (Sartre 1989). For Sartre, "man is condemned to be free" as we have no choice but to create ourselves. However, in his view, this logically requires there is no God or all-knowing deity as if there was we would exist under a constant gaze rendering us unfree (Sartre 1957: 22–23). While there is much to unpack, Sartre highlights how our perspective of an autonomously exercised free will can be restricted from the perspective of another.

autonomy is of primary importance for our freedom. But what this view of freedom shows is that having choices in pursuit of what is valuable can make the three different approaches to freedom compatible under the umbrella of autonomous choice along a horizon of future possibilities. Any coherent account of freedom must account for our autonomy and the possible realization of our freedom.[15]

As we have seen, each of these parts is heavily contested. We recognize that no one is free to do anything, but it is not always clear where the line should be drawn, although it is usually to avoid harm to others and oneself may play a key role in drawing this line. We acknowledge that freedom is valuable and allows us to pursue what we find valuable. Nonetheless, we may view value differently and have contrasting positions on what makes freedom valuable. Finally, we must see freedom as *our* choices that are possible to realize, but how this might manifest itself within political institutions is also contested, as we shall see in Chapter 5 on democracy.

Nonetheless, these three different parts do work together. For example, we argue that we are free to pursue goals valuable individually to ourselves provided that we do not cause unjustified harm to others. This view accepts our freedom is constrained so we avoid harming and pursue what is of valuable, and that this is a choice we are able to exercise. Of course, I have not said what these goals might be only that they cannot cause unjustified harm to others. Nor have I set out when harm might be justified, such as in self-defense. A *unified* theory of freedom that brought these parts together would need to do so. But the example suffices to illustrate that this unity is possible.

In sum, there are three main theories about freedom that are usually presented as rivals to each other. This is because each sees freedom in a different way: a negative freedom *from* constraint, a positive freedom *to* achieve some end, or a republican freedom *without* coercion. It is not obvious that these three different ways of understanding freedom are incompatible. Instead of three different theories about freedom, my comments are meant to indicate that elements from each might be unified together.

[15] My account of freedom emphasizes *possibility* and not *probability*. It is not essential that my autonomously chosen pursuit will probably lead to a desired achievement for it to be free. For instance, I may be free to learn Latin where I can access suitable instruction, but its lessons might not become learned and my desired goal not achieved. My pursuit of learning a language was possible in this case and that is enough, no matter how probable it would be achieved.

1.6.1 Alienation

There is a missing part to our discussion about freedom thus far. Is it enough to say you are free when you can get an education, but nevertheless choose not to? Or are you free when the community shapes its laws, but you choose not to take part in the community's deliberations?

This missing part is the problem of alienation, where individuals have a conviction about themselves as essentially separated from others. Hegel says:

> When a large mass of people sinks below the level of a certain standard of living . . . that feeling of right, integrity and honour which comes from supporting oneself by one's own activity and work is lost. This leads to the creation of a rabble (Hegel 1990: §244).

Hegel's rabble refers to individuals who are alienated from their community. This is sometimes thought to be a situation only arising from economic poverty, as Hegel describes the rabble as falling "below . . . a certain standard of living" (Hegel 1990: §244). But he is clear that anyone rich or poor can become a rabble as their extremes of wealth or poverty can fuel a disconnection of themselves from others (Brooks 2020a).

Alienation is a concern for any theory of freedom. These theories posit that we are free if unconstrained by others or able to achieve goals or have opportunities to shape how we are governed. The alienated see themselves as essentially removed from their community. They have a conviction that their say does not matter, that no matter how loud their voice they will not be heard nor will it make any difference. The ways in which they are governed are perceived as like being ruled by a foreign despot where rules are seen as drawn up and imposed by others on them. While they may live side-by-side with others, the alienated see their neighbors as part of a separate world that excludes them. Their world is not their own; it is an other to them.

Alienation is a problem because when we say that someone is free to achieve a goal or to take part in deliberating about how they are governed this is supposed to mark out something of importance. But if someone does not recognize such goals or identify with the community and its deliberative ends, the value of their freedom seems lost. For example, republicans can say that we are free where everyone can take part in a deliberative democracy. However, this assumes most, if not all, of us will wish to take part and co-create our laws and public policies.

When many do not or see this process as not inclusive, the outcomes of deliberation may well appear like an arbitrary imposition on them and contrary to being free. Republicanism assumes that the ability to participate is enough to secure freedom. However, it neglects those that see this option as illusory or inauthentic: where taking part is meaningful as a fellow member in a shared enterprise. The problem is that not every citizen feels like they are a part of the community in some essential way. Too often "the community" is seen as a separate entity to which the alienated individual lacks any substantive standing within. And too often they are overlooked by political philosophers, too.

Hegel thought the problem of alienation was one of the greatest threats to civil society and without any easy solution. He was right. So much of how our society works runs on shared understandings and trust (Brooks 2022d). Where this trust breaks down, so too can social cohesion weaken – and make finding freedom with others more elusive. Changing convictions towards improved inclusion is easier said than done. We might start with the idea that integration of people within a community is a two-way street with obligations cutting both ways: there must be effort by individuals to connect with other and a community that supports and facilitates this coming together – or we risk communities continuing to grow further apart. Such work seems critical if most theories about freedom are to have relevance for those they apply to: we must possess freedom *and* a conviction of ourselves as free. Having one without the other will simply not work.

This is why alienation poses a threat to our autonomy. Where we are separated from others, alienated individuals may lack the ability to self-govern themselves without that valuable connection with others; the alienated become disconnected to the point it might inhibit their autonomous decision-making as they act in isolation. But this does not mean that alienation makes us unfree, only that it threatens our ability to be free. If we want freedom, then we must protect ourselves and others from alienation.

1.7 Paternalism

Paternalism is about justified interferences with our freedom. It is often claimed that with freedom comes responsibility and that all freedoms have limits. A freedom of speech is not a right to shout "fire" in a crowded theater which may create a panic leading to

serious injuries. Nor is a freedom to possess arms a right for any individual to own and use any kind of weapon, like nuclear weapons. Freedoms have limits. The question is where to draw the line between what we are free or unfree to do.

The best-known and most influential view of paternalism is John Stuart Mill's *harm principle*. He says:

> The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle . . . That principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant (Mill 1989: 13).

Mill's principle appears simple. We are free to do whatever we like if what we do does not cause harm to others. This principle can restrict freedom in several areas where we might want limits. For example, actions like violent crimes are obvious harms to others and so no one is free to do them according to the harm principle. Likewise, actions like theft also harm others in terms of their property rights or livelihoods and so also disallowed.

If someone seeks to do harm to others in these or other ways, they are not free to do so. This means, for Mill, that we are justified in such instances to interfere with that individual's liberty of action. When someone has no right to harm, we have a right to constrain them. This is the only instance where we may justifiably interfere with another's freedom. Freedom has limits and the harm principle helps show where these limits are drawn.

The harm principle is more complicated than it may appear. Consider contact sports like soccer or American football. The object of these games is not to hurt others, but players may hurt others however unintentionally in playing these games. Mill's harm principle might be amended to say that where any such harm is consented to in advance and unintentional it may be that players may consent to a risk of harm. Now consider a sport like boxing where the object does involve harming others, such as knowing out an opponent to win a match. It might be said similarly that participants can consent to boxing if the risks were known in advance. But there seem very clear limits to what might be consented to. Suppose there was a likely or certain risk of being seriously maimed or killed, like in the fictional

television series *Squid Game*. The likely risks and more serious harms may well be too much for the state to allow others to consent to it.

Readers will notice that the harms referred to are harms to others. Philosophers sometimes refer to these as *other-regarding harms*, as harms regarding other people. But we might ask: what of *self-regarding harms*? These are instances where what we do causes harm to ourselves. Examples might include the use of illicit drugs where the only one harmed, at least directly, is ourselves. Mill's harm principle does not explicitly speak to such cases, but we can work out how it might apply.

There are three ways of thinking about the harm principle might, or might not, apply to self-regarding harms. The first might be to say that Mill's original definition is correct and that we should only restrict freedom where we might cause harm to others, no matter what our actions might be. The second way is to say that Mill's definition applies because we reject the idea that any harm is only self-regarding. For example, the families of those harmed through prolonged drug use may suffer in trying to support their loved ones. In some sense, none of us lives isolated from others and it might be argued that all harms impact others either directly or indirectly. A third way of thinking about the harm principle is that it can apply to self-regarding harms too – even if not envisaged in Mill's original definition. So, we might be thought free to do whatever we like as long as we do not damage ourselves in some substantial way.

No matter which view we agree with, the main issue is what exactly constitutes *harm*? It is probably uncontroversial to say that harms which include unconsented violence like assault and murder should be banned by *any* version of the harm principle. Other kinds of harms like breaches of the property rights of others through crimes such as theft, burglary or fraud would also be included. But where else to draw the line? Some activities where harm may arise, such as through boxing or contact sports, might be justified on the grounds of consent to reasonable risks. But it is not obvious that consent is always sufficient nor what counts as a tolerable risk of harm. Moreover, others may raise concerns about a harm to other things – such as to social cohesion or harm to public morality.

These examples show that the harm principle is deceptively complex. It is not that one cannot do any form of harm, as some kinds of harm may be justified or excusable. Contact sports or acting in self-defense are commonly used examples of permissible harmful activities.

We need to know which kinds of harms should be forbidden, the possible role of consent and where the relevant limits should be drawn.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the topic of freedom. We started with abstract questions of whether we are free and how we can know it, whether it is assumed or through a social process of mutual recognition. We have considered whether freedom consists in having a choice of options or whether the only important factor is if our preferred option is available, even if there were no alternatives. We then looked at the three main definitions of freedom as negative, positive, and republican examining their attractiveness, limitations and possibility compatibility. On the latter, we observed the importance of possibility; that any conception of freedom must relate to freedom that might be realized. No one is free to do what they cannot achieve under any circumstances. An omnipotent God is free to do anything, not human beings like you and me.

Everyone may think they know what freedom is about, while often taking for granted they know that they are free. Philosophers have debated these issues for centuries and this chapter is only a first glance at a fascinating, as well as complex, area. Readers should reflect on which view of freedom seems most coherent and compelling and why to grasp better how they see themselves fitting into these wider discussions.

Further Reading

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