

Individual Freedom: A Pluralist Account

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes a pluralist analysis of the idea of freedom that seeks to account for its complexity. The starting point is dissatisfaction with attempts to demonstrate the superiority of one specification of the concept of freedom – negative, positive, republican, etc. – over others. According to the author, each of these specifications captures an aspect of freedom but does not exhaust its meaning. The author distinguishes six dimensions of freedom: freedom as non-subordination, freedom as permission, freedom as non-prevention, freedom of choice, freedom as non-subjection, and freedom as self-determination. According to the author, the six dimensions of freedom are not entirely reducible to one another. Only a concept of freedom that embraces them all can do justice to the idea and value of freedom.

KEYWORDS

Freedom, unfreedom, negative and positive liberty, republican liberty, analysis of concepts

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1. *Introduction*

Among the values professed by the West, freedom is second to none. The Western cult of freedom dates back to classical antiquity. According to Thucydides, Pericles, in his famous epitaph delivered in the winter of 431-430 BC for those who fell in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, identifies the freedom of Athenian citizens, both public and private, as one of the distinguishing features of democracy and a major source of pride for the city of Athens. This identification is confirmed by Plato, a critic of democracy, who sees the peculiarity of this type of political regime in the unlimited freedom that can only lead to a state of anarchy, which sooner or later degenerates into its opposite, tyranny. In ancient Greece and Rome, freedom was seen as the natural state of human beings in full possession of their rational faculties (considered a male prerogative), while slavery was seen mainly as an artificial condition imposed on prisoners of war whose lives were spared, debtors unable to pay their debts, and inferior human beings unable to govern themselves, and justified by utilitarian considerations or as a form of punishment. The condition of the free man was judged so much superior to that of the slave that, from Greek and Latin philosophy onwards, the ideas of freedom and slavery were transferred from the level of legal relations to that of morality and used to distinguish the condition of vicious men – “slaves to their own passions” – from that of virtuous men. Since then, the idea that a slave’s life is unworthy of a human being and that freedom is a condition of the good life has remained a constant, despite the changing ideas of slavery and freedom.

European political modernity is based on the idea of the individual born free, as evidenced by the numerous references to this original state of freedom that appear in the works of the social contract theorists – the founding fathers of modern political thought – and at the beginning of many of the charters of rights promulgated from the end of the 18th century onwards. The motto of the French Revolution – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* – puts freedom first. Liberalism – a doctrine or family of doctrines that refers to the idea of freedom in its own name – is the

* Much of what I know about the recent philosophical debate on the concept of freedom has come from discussions over the past few years with two of my doctoral students – Elena Icardi and Ilkin Huseynli – who have approached freedom from opposite fronts in their doctoral research – the republican front, Elena, and that of the proponents of negative social freedom, Ilkin. In the course of our intense discussions, I have always hesitated to take a stand for one or the other, convinced that both grasp a part of what freedom is, but not all of it. This paper is a defence of that position. My thinking on freedom has also been influenced by reading FACCHI, GIOLO 2020, a book that takes a pluralist approach to freedom and explores possible tensions between different dimensions of freedom more than I do in this paper. I presented a first draft of this paper at the 2nd Pavia Workshop on Freedom, which took place in Pavia on 4 and 5 June 2024. I would like to thank all the participants at the workshop for their comments on my paper and for the general discussion, which was very useful. I would also like to thank Alessandra Facchi and Elena Icardi for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and two anonymous reviewers of *Diritto @ questioni pubbliche* for their suggestions.

dominant political ideology in the West today, and liberal principles form the backbone of constitutionalism. In his famous 1941 State of the Union address, Roosevelt identified freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear as the “four freedoms” that all people everywhere should enjoy. In the Manichean vision of the clash of civilisations theorists, the West is often portrayed as the free world, a view confirmed by those critics of the West who accuse it of an excess of freedom: an anarchic freedom based on value nihilism and the cause of moral decay and social disintegration. On the other hand, there is no doubt that many people today, including many women and members of minorities who do not enjoy the most basic freedoms in many countries of the world, are attracted to the West precisely by the promise of greater freedom: freedom from violence, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom to study and work, emotional, sexual and reproductive freedom, political freedom and, above all, freedom from want.

In the history of human civilization, freedom is a noble ideal for which many people have fought and continue to fight. Struggles for freedom include struggles for the liberation of slaves from the yoke of slavery, for the liberation of peoples from colonial domination and authoritarian regimes, for the liberation of women from patriarchy, for the liberation of sexual minorities from oppression, for the liberation of non-human animals from the cruelty of the human animal, and so on. We owe much of humanity’s progress to these struggles¹.

These summary references to the importance of the idea of freedom in our philosophical tradition and political culture cannot be understood by assuming that they refer to an unambiguous idea of freedom. It is equally clear that it would be absurd to assume that most of those who have fought for freedom in the past and continue to do so today have been mistaken in interpreting their struggles as struggles for freedom, whereas such struggles would be struggles for autonomy, democracy, welfare, equality or anything other than freedom. The aim of this essay is to present a pluralist conception of freedom that can do justice to the rich history of this idea and to how many struggles for autonomy, democracy, welfare and equality are in fact struggles for freedom.

In section 2, I briefly review the debate over the idea of freedom in the last century and offer some methodological considerations about the task of philosophical analysis of this concept and its relation to linguistic usage. In section 3, I distinguish six different dimensions of freedom in order to account for the different meanings of the term ‘freedom’. In section 4, I explain why I decided to exclude some other candidates for the role of dimensions of freedom from my analysis. In section 5 I explain how the different dimensions of freedom I have identified are not entirely reducible to one another. Finally, in the conclusion, I offer some reflections on the political relevance of the different dimensions of freedom.

2. *The philosophical analysis of the concept of freedom*

The ambiguity of the term ‘freedom’, the fact that in everyday language it lends itself to being used and is usually used to denote different things, is recognised by all those who have been engaged in the philosophical analysis of the concept of freedom, at least since Constant’s famous lecture *La liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes*².

¹ As can be seen from this brief overview, in the English language there are two terms for the concept of freedom, one of Germanic origin, ‘freedom’, and one of Latin origin, ‘liberty’. From ‘freedom’ comes ‘freeman’, from ‘liberty’ comes ‘liberalism’ and ‘liberation’. Although there have been some attempts in philosophical literature to distinguish between the two terms (see WILLIAMS 2001), they continue to be used as synonyms in English, and I will treat them as such.

² CONSTANT 1997 [1819]. Cf. BERLIN 2002 [1958]; BOBBIO 1995 [1978]; BARBERIS 2021 [1999]; CARTER 2022.

Contemporary philosophical reflection on freedom has followed the path laid out by Berlin in his famous 1958 lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty*³, in which the author distinguishes between two concepts of freedom, which he calls “negative” and “positive” respectively. According to the negative concept of freedom, freedom would consist in the absence of external obstacles that would prevent individuals from doing what they might want to do. To the positive concept of freedom, on the other hand, Berlin traces a number of heterogeneous conceptions of freedom that are united by the idea that freedom consists in a quality of the actions of individuals and/or in some form of control by the agents over the factors that determine their actions. Berlin’s positive concept of freedom is related to both the moral idea of freedom as rationality (i.e. the control of one’s actions by reason, which is able to rule over the passions) and the political idea of freedom as (participation in) self-government⁴. Berlin believes that politics should only be concerned with negative freedom. Positive freedom, in its political sense, becomes relevant only as a guarantee of negative freedom: a means by which individuals can exercise control over their rulers and prevent them from abusing the power at their disposal. Indeed, Berlin claims that when political authority is exercised to promote the positive freedom of individuals in its moral sense, it always ends up restricting their negative freedom by forcing individuals to act in the way that seems most “rational” to those exercising such authority. Moreover, the idea that those who exercise political authority are entitled to restrict the negative freedom of individuals to promote their positive freedom can provide a veneer of legitimacy for abuses of that authority aimed at promoting the interests of those who exercise it. Totalitarian regimes provide many examples of both phenomena.

Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive freedom has dominated philosophical reflection on freedom over the last sixty years and has determined its lines of development. Some have taken up the task of defining more fully the concepts of negative and positive freedom and what distinguishes them⁵, some have proposed particular conceptions of one and/or the other⁶, some have tried to bring both concepts back into a unified concept of freedom of which negative and positive freedom would be conceptions⁷, and some have tried to defend the political relevance of positive freedom against Berlin’s criticism⁸. There has also been no shortage of those who have suggested that the distinction between negative and positive freedom is not exhaustive, arguing that there are concepts of freedom that do not fit into this dichotomy. The best known of these is probably that of republican freedom, which identifies freedom with the absence of domination⁹, but the idea of social freedom, recently put forward by authors working in the Hegelian tradition¹⁰, is also worth mentioning as an attempt to move beyond Berlin’s binary distinction.

Most participants in the philosophical discussion of freedom in recent decades have interpreted their contribution as being aimed at specifying a particular concept of freedom,

³ BERLIN 2002 [1958].

⁴ There is some ambiguity in the use of the term ‘positive freedom’ in recent literature. Sen, for example, sometimes speaks of positive freedom to refer to the state of a person who not only enjoys the negative freedom to do something, but also possesses the necessary means to do so. See SEN 1992, 1999 *passim*. This is a different use of the term ‘positive freedom’ from Berlin’s, which is likely to cause much confusion. As Van Parijs rightly points out, what he calls “real freedom”, which corresponds to Sen’s positive freedom, is actually, according to Berlin’s classification, a conception of negative freedom, which includes the lack of means among the obstacles that can make a person not free to do something. See VAN PARIJS 1995, 21 ff.

⁵ See CARTER 2022 for an overview.

⁶ See HAYEK 1960, ch. 1; OPPENHEIM 1961; STEINER 1974-1975, 1994; MILLER 1983; VAN PARIJS 1995; CARTER 1999; KRAMER 2003; HUSEYNLI 2024, for negative freedom, and at least CHRISTMAN 1991, 2005 and the texts collected in CHRISTMAN 2021, for positive freedom.

⁷ See MACCALLUM 1967.

⁸ See TAYLOR 1979.

⁹ See SKINNER 1998, 2002; VIROLI 1999; PETTIT 1997, chs. 1-2, 2012, ch. 1.

¹⁰ Most notably HONNETH 2011.

without claiming that the concept of freedom on which they focused was superior as a concept of freedom to the others. Their disagreement has been over which of the various conceptions of negative, positive, or republican freedom best expresses the concepts of negative, positive, and republican freedom. In this way, the participants in the philosophical discussion of freedom remained fairly faithful to the analytical programme of Berlin, who never denied and indeed argued that the concept of positive freedom was as much a concept of freedom as negative freedom, although he expressed his political preference for the former and believed that the latter should not hinder political action.

However, not all those who have dealt with freedom have given the same evidence of pluralism. Among the advocates of negative freedom, which has received the most attention partly because of its greater apparent proximity to liberalism, which remains the dominant position in contemporary political thought, there have been those who have gone further than Berlin, arguing not only that negative freedom is politically preferable to positive freedom or other, third, concepts of freedom – a legitimate position – but that negative freedom, or some conception of negative freedom, is preferable to positive freedom and to other concepts of freedom qua concept of freedom, interpretation of the idea of freedom¹¹. And in many ways so do the advocates of republican freedom.

Given the undeniable fact that the term ‘freedom’ has had and continues to have many different meanings in the history of political ideas and in ordinary language, and unless we want to adopt a form of Platonism of concepts that is completely untenable, it is not clear how to understand the position of those who claim that one particular concept of freedom is superior to the others. The most plausible interpretation of this position seems to me to be that which interprets it as an invitation to a clearer use of language, which minimises the risk of misunderstanding due to the ambiguity of words. According to the ideal of perfectly clear language, each word should have only one meaning, which should be as fixed as possible. Those who pursue such an ideal might suggest that it would be desirable to restrict the use of the word ‘freedom’, giving it only one of the many meanings it has in ordinary language, and finding other terms to indicate the remaining meanings. There are those who argue, for example, that one could use the term ‘autonomy’ to indicate the concept of positive freedom, reserving the term ‘freedom’ for the concept of negative freedom. Those who take this position assign to philosophy the task of reforming language¹².

While I can understand the aspirations behind the ideal of maximally clear language, I think it is illusory to think that philosophy can reform language, especially when the desired reform concerns axiologically loaded terms such as the term ‘freedom’. There is no doubt that these terms have not only a descriptive but also an evaluative function. Most people value freedom, even if they understand it differently and even if they do not always have a clear idea of how they understand it. Even if it were possible to agree on the need to regulate the use of the term ‘freedom’, it would be difficult to agree on how to regulate it: few would be willing to give up the possibility of using the term ‘freedom’ – with all its positive value – to indicate the concept of freedom that is most valuable to them¹³. Such a project of language reform should therefore be abandoned.

The philosophical analysis of the concept of freedom can help to improve our linguistic interactions, to promote mutual understanding, to make us aware of the fact that the term

¹¹ Even the most famous attempt to reduce the negative and positive concepts of freedom to a single concept of freedom, that of MACCALLUM 1967, can be interpreted as a generalisation of the concept of negative freedom, to which the concept of positive freedom can only be adapted with difficulty.

¹² At the time of its publication in 1921, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* was interpreted as a call for language reform in this direction. For example, by members of the Vienna Circle. Wittgenstein himself later denied the possibility, or even the necessity, of such a language reform in the *Philosophical Investigations*. See WITTGENSTEIN 1922 [1921]; 1953.

¹³ As MACCALLUM 1967, 313 also notes.

‘freedom’ can and is commonly ascribed several meanings, all of which are equally legitimate in linguistic usage, and to help us to distinguish and identify these different meanings. Those who believe that philosophical analysis is essentially concerned with the analysis of language, that it must start from linguistic usage and cannot stray too far from it, cannot fail to notice the semantic complexity of the term ‘freedom’. Any philosophical account of the concept of freedom that wishes to do justice to this complexity will have to distinguish between the different meanings that the concept can take.

In this essay I will refer to the different meanings of the term ‘freedom’ as many “dimensions” of freedom. However, I do not intend to suggest that they are different dimensions of the same concept, identifiable on the basis of some common substrate. If one can speak of a general concept of freedom, this concept must be thought of as complex, molecular, resulting from the sum of different concepts that do not necessarily have common elements. The unifying element between these concepts is linguistic usage.

When I speak of different “dimensions” of freedom, I am referring to the different qualities by which a subject can be said to be free. In attempting to describe these dimensions, in this essay I will take the human individual as the subject of freedom. I will therefore consider the various dimensions of individual freedom. However, I do not exclude, and indeed tend to believe, that the same dimensions, or many of them, with some variations, can be translated and applied to collective subjects. I will leave this extension of the analysis for another occasion.

3. *Six dimensions of freedom*

In this section I distinguish six dimensions of individual freedom. I draw extensively on the analytical work of those who have devoted themselves over the past few decades to the in-depth study of what I identify as these dimensions¹⁴.

3.1. *Freedom as non-subordination or immunity*

The first dimension of freedom is formal¹⁵. The clearest manifestation of this dimension of freedom is the condition that distinguishes the free individual from the slave. What distinguishes the condition of the slave, what constitutes its essence, is subjection to the authority of another private individual, the master, or, in the case of public slaves, to the authority of the competent magistrate. Whether or not this authority is exercised has no bearing on the condition of the slave’s lack of freedom. The mere existence of such authority is sufficient to place the slave in a condition of unfreedom.

¹⁴ My treatment is not historical. I could have proceeded differently, tracing the various dimensions of freedom that I distinguish to different moments in the history of this idea. Indeed, there is no doubt that in the course of this history one or other dimension of freedom has been the focus of attention. This does not mean, however, that the history of the idea of freedom is a linear history, in the course of which a certain idea of freedom, after dominating attention for a certain period, is replaced by another idea of freedom and disappears from the scene once and for all, and even less that the history of the idea of freedom can be described as an evolutionary process in which the ideas of freedom that have emerged more recently are superior to those that preceded them. This, moreover, would contradict the pluralist approach I have adopted, which sees the different dimensions of freedom as not reducible to each other and as all important. For a reconstruction of the history of the idea of freedom, see BARBERIS 2021 [1999].

¹⁵ To be precise, it is the condition of unfreedom that is formal because it depends on the existence of norms that subordinate an individual to the authority of another individual or a collective subject. Freedom as non-subordination would be fully realised even in the absence of any norm. But to the extent that normative systems exist, freedom is also a formal condition that depends on the content of these normative systems: on their not containing norms that subordinate an individual to an authority.

One might think that once the institution of slavery has been abolished, the dimension of freedom we are dealing with is no longer of great importance. Having been extended to all individuals, this dimension of freedom can be considered as acquired: in a society without slaves, all individuals are free. This is undoubtedly true if we identify the slaves' state of unfreedom with the formal status of being a slave. According to this interpretation, freedom is a matter of status and is resolved into a dichotomous opposition: an individual can be a slave, and therefore unfree, or free; freedom is not a matter of degree. The situation is different if the condition of slavery is understood as a condition in which slaves find themselves by virtue of their status, but not reducible to that status, just as the entitlement to political rights, though generally dependent on the status of citizen, is distinct from that status. This second interpretation of the freedom of the slave seems to me to be more interesting, because it allows us to make a generalisation from the condition of the slave that allows us to identify a condition of unfreedom that can exist even in the absence of slavery proper, and which has indeed traditionally been identified as a form of unfreedom: I refer to the condition of the individual subject to authority, whether private or public¹⁶. By 'authority' I refer here to a set of formal, typically legal, powers to impose or remove obligations and to confer and revoke formal attributes such as status, powers, rights, immunities and liabilities. The dimension of freedom denied by such a condition I call freedom as non-subordination or freedom as immunity.

This dimension of freedom has been particularly emphasised by the republican tradition and taken up by neo-republican theorists¹⁷. However, in the literature on republican freedom, this dimension of freedom, formal, is not always clearly distinguished from another dimension of freedom, factual, which it is good to keep distinct and which I will deal with later (see section 3.5).

The idea of freedom as non-subordination allows for different degrees of freedom. If the owner's authority over the slave is unlimited, the slave's condition of unfreedom is absolute. But what distinguishes the condition of the slave of a master with unlimited authority from that of the subject of an absolute sovereign is only the fact that the slave is subject to the authority of more than one subject – that of the master and that of the sovereign – whereas the non-slave subject of an absolute sovereign is subject only to the authority of that sovereign. If, on the other hand, the authority of the master over the slave admits of some limits, the slave will be able to enjoy margins of freedom, albeit in a state of general unfreedom. And the same is true of the subject of a sovereign whose authority is not absolute but limited. The same concept of freedom can be used to describe the condition of women subject to paternal or marital authority, of minors subject to the authority of one or both parents, of workers under the authority of their employers.

The more unlimited the authority to which one is subject, the less free one is; the more limited the authority, the more free one is. From this point of view, the greatest degree of freedom is that which depends on the absence of all authority. A consequence of this way of understanding this first dimension of freedom is that, in the presence of an authority that is considered to be valid in some way, the freedom of those subject to that authority is never absolute. And yet its extent can vary considerably.

By referring to this dimension of freedom, we can understand the idea of those who see in the constitutional limits to public authority, and more generally in the legal limits to any authority, public or private, guarantees of freedom. In fact, such limits give the individual immunity from authority¹⁸. Thus, for example, the freedom guaranteed by the constitutional

¹⁶ My preference for this interpretation underlies my decision to rename this first dimension of freedom – which I had originally called “freedom as status”, in line with an important tradition – “freedom as non-subordination or immunity”.

¹⁷ See the references in footnote 9 above.

¹⁸ For the concept of immunity I follow HOHFELD 1913.

freedom is not simply that which derives from the absence of certain obligations (a freedom which corresponds to the dimension of freedom that we will deal with in section 3.2), but that which derives from the impossibility of public or private authority to impose these obligations. The fact that the individuals protected by the constitutional freedoms cannot themselves dispose of this protection extends this limitation also to the authority that individuals can exercise over themselves, which means that they cannot, even if they wanted to, deprive themselves of the freedom secured by these freedoms. The same applies to the restrictions on individuals' power to contract, which protect their freedom by preventing them from binding themselves to certain obligations.

It is above all the fact that constitutional freedoms cannot be disposed of by those who possess them, and that they set limits to any authority, that makes them guarantees of freedom¹⁹. This does not in any way detract from the fact that these freedoms, or some of them – I am thinking in particular of political freedoms – can enable individuals to act in a way that reduces the arbitrariness of the exercise of authority²⁰. What I do not find entirely convincing is the idea of some neo-republican theorists who identify the condition of submission to a non-arbitrary authority with a condition of complete freedom, and the cause of the condition of unfreedom not in authority but in the fact that it can be exercised arbitrarily²¹. If one is interested in freedom as non-subordination, this is simply wrong. People who are subject to authority, whether public or private, are subordinate and therefore unfree, regardless of whether that authority can be exercised non-arbitrarily. No doubt it is better to be subject to an authority that cannot be exercised arbitrarily than to one that can, and perhaps it is better to be subject to an authority in whose exercise one participates than to an alien authority, but this does not alter the fact that mere submission to authority, any authority, limits one's freedom as non-subordination. This freedom can only be increased by limits that reduce the scope of authority. Insofar as limits on the arbitrariness of the exercise of authority reduce the scope of authority, those limits increase the freedom of the individuals subject to that authority, but do not make them completely free. I think the opposite idea depends on a confusion between freedom as non-subordination and another dimension of freedom (see section 3.5).

3.2. *Freedom as permission*

The second dimension of freedom is also formal. It is the dimension of freedom that links the notion of freedom with that of permission²² (or licence). Sometimes, especially in legal language, the term 'liberty', usually synonymous with 'freedom', is used to refer specifically to this dimension of freedom²³.

This dimension of freedom can be understood in two different ways. According to a less demanding conception, one can speak of the freedom to do something on condition that one is not subject to a negative obligation not to do that thing. According to this conception of freedom as permission, the freedom to do something is compatible with a (positive) obligation

¹⁹ Cf. FERRAJOLI 2019; FACCHI, GIOLO 2020, 104 ff. See also FACCHI 2018 on the history of the idea of self-ownership as a set of inalienable rights protecting personal freedom.

²⁰ I consider authority to be exercised in a non-arbitrary manner when it is exercised with fair regard for the interests of the individuals concerned.

²¹ Cf. PETTIT 1997, 2012.

²² Permission shouldn't be understood as the result of an explicit performative act, i.e. the act of permitting something, possibly by waiving a previously existing obligation or by exempting an individual from a generally binding obligation. Permission is the condition that depends on the absence of obligation. I am assuming here a general principle according to which everything that is not forbidden or required is permitted.

²³ My analysis of this dimension of freedom is largely based on the legal analyses of HOHFELD 1913, who uses the term 'licence', and WILLIAMS 1956, who uses the term 'liberty'.

to do that thing²⁴. Conversely, according to a more demanding conception, one can speak of freedom to do something only if one is under neither a (negative) obligation not to do it nor a (positive) obligation to do it, i.e. only if one has a double permission: permission to do it and permission not to do it. According to this conception, it is not enough to have permission to do something in order to be free to do it; freedom also requires permission not to do it.

However one conceives it, freedom as permission, as a formal dimension of freedom, depends on a system of norms, which may be moral, legal or other²⁵.

Freedom as permission is maximum, unlimited, when one is not subject to any system of norms, as is the case, at least in the external forum, in the state of nature imagined by Hobbes in his *Leviathan*²⁶. If, on the other hand, individuals are subject to systems of norms, their freedom in relation to each of these systems will be more or less extensive and will always relate to specific behaviour: everything that is not subject to prohibition or to neither prohibition nor command, depending on the conception of freedom as permission that is adopted.

Of course, permission to do something does not imply the actual possibility of doing it. An individual may be free to do something, in the sense of freedom as permission, while being unable to do it because of lack of skills or resources, or because of interference (permitted or not) by other individuals.

3.3. Freedom as non-prevention

The third dimension of freedom is the one that best corresponds to the idea of negative freedom. Generally speaking, negative freedom can be used to describe the quality that individuals lack when something, an obstacle, prevents them from doing something, or would prevent them from doing it if they tried. The main points of disagreement among negative freedom theorists concern the nature of the obstacle which, by preventing individuals from doing something, would deprive them of the freedom to do that thing. Here I take the position of social freedom theorists²⁷, according to which only obstacles that depend on other individuals can make an individual unfree in the dimension of freedom I am now considering. Not, for example, congenital disabilities or natural phenomena. Social freedom theorists also argue among themselves about the kinds of other people's behaviour that can make an individual unfree. The following questions are debated:

- Whether only acts or also omissions can be the cause of unfreedom.
- Whether, in order to be a cause of unfreedom, the acts (or omissions) that prevent an individual from doing something must be acts (or omissions) that are morally or legally unjust, i.e. acts that the individual doing them has no moral or legal permission to do.
- Whether the causal link between the behaviour of an individual and the fact that another individual is prevented from doing something must be immediate or not: for example, whether the behaviour of an individual at a time T_1 can be the cause or effect of the unfreedom of another individual at a time T_2 sufficiently distant from T_1 .

In my view, the conception of social freedom that best describes the dimension of freedom we are referring to when we identify unfreedom and prevention, and want to distinguish this dimension of freedom from the more general dimension of freedom of choice (see section 3.4),

²⁴ See KRAMER 1999, 16 who also attributes this view to Hohfeld, correctly I think.

²⁵ What was said in footnote 15 about freedom as non-subordination also applies mutatis mutandis to this dimension of freedom: it is actually the condition of unfreedom that is formal.

²⁶ HOBBS 1991 [1651].

²⁷ See HAYEK 1960, ch. 1; OPPENHEIM 1961; STEINER 1974-1975, 1994; MILLER 1983; KRAMER 2003; HUSEYNLI 2024.

is the one that establishes that only actions, not therefore omissions, can cause unfreedom, that actions can cause unfreedom even if they are morally or legally permissible, and that there must be a fairly direct causal link between actions that cause unfreedom and prevention.

The last aspect is the most difficult to specify. It is clear that if individuals physically restrain other individuals by preventing them from leaving the room in which they are, those individuals are restricting their freedom by making it impossible for them to leave the room. The same is true when an individual, knowing that another individual is in a room, locks the door of that room to prevent that individual from leaving. On the other hand, I find unconvincing conceptions of social freedom that extend the concept of prevention in such a way that any obstacle that depends on human action, no matter how distant in time from the moment when an individual is prevented by that obstacle from doing something, counts as a prevention and therefore as a source of unfreedom. These conceptions seem to me to be a counterintuitive extension of the idea of freedom as non-prevention in order to account for insights about freedom that can be better explained by other dimensions of freedom.

It seems to me rather implausible to argue that an individual who loses the ability to walk because of the aggression of another individual can be said to be unfree to walk, whereas an individual who is deprived of the ability to walk from birth would simply be unable to walk, but not unfree to do so. Similarly, I find unconvincing the idea that poverty, as opposed to a natural disability, can be counted as a cause of unfreedom as prevention because it is the interaction of individuals that determines the distribution of wealth.

I believe that the idea that corresponds better to our linguistic intuitions is the one that limits the absence of freedom as non-prevention to cases in which the following circumstances are realised:

- Individuals who want to do something are prevented from doing it by the direct intervention of other individuals.
- Individuals are prevented from doing something by an obstacle deliberately created by other individuals to prevent them from doing that thing.

An example of the first type is an individual who physically restrains another individual to prevent them from leaving the room in which they are located. An example of the second type is an individual who deliberately locks another individual in a room. In both cases, in order for there to be prevention, the individuals preventing other individuals from doing something must have the intention to do so. This considerably narrows down the cases in which one can speak of a violation of that particular dimension of freedom that is freedom as prevention. On this account, for example, an individual who stands in front of a door and prevents another individual from leaving a room does not necessarily make that individual unfree in terms of the dimension of freedom as prevention, provided that, when asked to move to allow that individual to leave the room, they move (assuming they can). If, when asked to move, they refuse to do so, then, and only then, can their behaviour be said to be a source of unfreedom as prevention. Prevention is a particularly serious source of unfreedom because it is an expression of a serious lack of respect for the individuals who are prevented from acting as they wish. Fortunately, this does not happen very often.

A final remark. In saying that lack of ability, lack of resources, or unintentional actions by which individuals prevent other individuals from doing what they want cannot be sources of unfreedom as prevention, I am not saying that they cannot be sources of unfreedom at all. I do think that both lack of ability and lack of resources, however they came about, are sources of unfreedom or less freedom, and that unintentional actions can be, but that the kind of freedom they (can) deny or limit is not freedom as non-prevention, but freedom of choice, which I discuss in the next section.

3.4. *Freedom of choice*

The fourth dimension of freedom is that which makes the freedom of individuals dependent on the range of opportunities from which they can choose.

Freedom of choice has an internal and an external dimension. The internal dimension of freedom of choice relates to the question of free will. I will not enter into that debate here. I am sceptical about the possibility of talking about free will. In any case, of the dimensions of freedom that I distinguish, the one that comes closest to freedom of will is the sixth (section 3.6), not freedom of choice. So for now I will concentrate on the external dimension of freedom of choice.

Individuals have freedom of choice when, regardless of what they want, the circumstances in which they find themselves are such that there are at least two different courses of action from which they could choose. Wherever individuals have the option of doing or not doing a particular action, there is freedom of choice. Individuals who are asked to choose between “their wallet or their life” have freedom of choice²⁸. A very limited freedom of choice, but a freedom of choice nonetheless. Freedom of choice, then, concerns the external circumstances that make a choice possible: individuals can be free to choose to do something even though they will never and could never choose to do that thing.

When we talk about freedom of choice, what is most interesting is not the absolute lack of freedom of choice, but its degree. Indeed, it is clear that individuals can enjoy different degrees of freedom of choice. The degree of individual freedom of choice depends on the number and quality of opportunities from which individuals can choose, and on the cost of each opportunity. By ‘opportunity’ I mean the actual possibility of doing, achieving or becoming something. The existence of an opportunity for an individual depends on the combination of external circumstances (including the conditions of freedom as non-prevention) and individual capabilities and resources. The dimension of freedom of choice helps us to account for the relationship between capabilities, resources and freedom.

The extent of individuals’ freedom of choice has a quantitative dimension, which depends on the number of opportunities available to individuals, and a qualitative dimension, which depends on the diversity of these opportunities. It also depends on the costs (material and non-material) that individuals would have to pay if they chose one or the other opportunity. Since there are several dimensions at play, it is not easy to make interpersonal comparisons of freedom of choice: it is not easy, for example, to determine whether the individual who has many opportunities, all very similar to each other, or the individual who has few but very different opportunities, is freer. The only case where it is easy to make an interpersonal comparison of freedom of choice is when the set of opportunities enjoyed by one individual is a subset of the opportunities enjoyed by another individual. In this case, we would say that the first individual has significantly less freedom of choice.

3.5. *Freedom as non-subjection*

The fifth dimension of freedom is that of freedom as a condition of not being subject to the power of other individuals (one or more), where individuals are subject to the power of other individuals when and to the extent that the latter can change what the former can do, achieve or become, and at what cost. The neo-republican conception of freedom as non-domination²⁹ is a special case of this dimension of freedom. The idea of freedom as non-domination adds to the idea of freedom as non-subjection the further requirement that the power to which individuals

²⁸ Cf. STEINER 1974-1975.

²⁹ See the references in footnote 9 above.

are subjected is a power that can be exercised arbitrarily, that is, without fair consideration of their interests. The difference between my position and the neo-republican one is that I assume that the existence of power relations between individuals always reduces the freedom of at least some of those individuals, no matter how that power may be exercised.

Neo-republican theorists who identify unfreedom with domination generally rule out the possibility of speaking of unfreedom if the power to which individuals are subject is so constrained that it can only be exercised in a non-arbitrary way, that is, with fair consideration of the interests of those individuals³⁰. They suggest, for example, that one could not speak of unfreedom in relation to the parent-child relationship, even though children are inevitably subject to the power of their parents, if there were guarantees that this power would be exercised in the best interests of the children. Nor, they suggest, can one speak of unfreedom in the relationship between government and citizens if the power of government is subject to such constraints as to ensure that it is exercised in a non-arbitrary way, in the equal interests of all citizens. I disagree. I think that, in the dimension I am considering here, children are unfree, or rather less free, because they are subject to the power of their parents, and that citizens are unfree, or less free, because they are subject to the power of government, however that power is exercised.

In practice, I think that the distinction between freedom as non-subjection and freedom as non-domination diminishes when one considers that wherever individuals are subject to the power of other individuals, there is always some risk that that power will be exercised arbitrarily. Constraints on power can reduce the risk that power will be exercised arbitrarily, sometimes to a considerable degree, but they cannot eliminate that risk altogether³¹. From this point of view, the relationship between parents and children, and that between the state and citizens, is always a relationship of domination in the neo-republican sense, and this is true more generally of all relationships of subjection, even though the risk of arbitrary exercise of power, and thus the intensity of domination, may be more or less serious, depending on the constraints limiting that risk and their effectiveness.

In the light of this consideration, my disagreement with the neo-republican theorists lies in the fact that they assume that there can be subjection without domination, whereas I believe that this is not possible.

Because I believe that the existence of power relations and a certain degree of subjection are not only inevitable given the human condition, but also necessary in a just and well-ordered society, and because I believe that when the risk of power being exercised arbitrarily is low, the benefits – even in terms of dimensions of freedom other than the one considered here – that flow from the existence of that power outweigh the costs in terms of the dimension of freedom considered here, I prefer to speak of “freedom as non-subjection”, an expression which seems to me to be more neutral than “freedom as non-domination”. Instead, I would suggest using the term ‘domination’ not to refer to a condition, but to refer to the arbitrary exercise of power.

Even in the case of freedom as non-subjection, as with other dimensions of freedom, freedom is a matter of degree³². Individuals can be more or less free depending on the extent to which they are subject to the power of other individuals. Among the factors that determine an

³⁰ See PETTIT 1997, 2012. Not all neo-republican theorists define arbitrariness in terms of the interests of those subject to authority. Cf. LOVETT 2012, 2022. I think that my considerations apply regardless of specific definitions of arbitrariness. I am indebted to Elena Icardi for a discussion on this point, and more generally on the content of this section, which led me to make numerous corrections. This does not mean, of course, that she will agree with what I write.

³¹ I take it that constraints on the arbitrary exercise of power can be institutional or non-institutional. The clearest example of institutional constraints is legal constraints. An example of non-institutional constraints are conventional norms, supported by widespread beliefs, which are effective in regulating individual behaviour because they have been internalised by individuals and/or are subject to non-institutional enforcement through social pressure and social sanction.

³² Cf. FACCHI, GIOLO 2020.

individual's freedom as non-subjection, particular attention should be paid to those that increase the risk of domination inherent in subjection. One such factor is the degree of dependence (economic, emotional or otherwise) on others. Dependence on others gives others power over us. Since dependence on others is an intrinsic factor of the human condition, no one is ever absolutely free from subjection. However, other things being equal, the more dependent people are on others, the less free they are and the greater the risk of domination; the more independent they are, the more free they are and the lower the risk of domination. This is a recurring and central theme in feminist reflection, which has always stressed the importance of securing women's economic independence from men as a necessary condition for their emancipation³³. The risk of domination is also lower in interdependent relationships characterised by power symmetry, since in this case the power of the individuals involved tends to balance each other out. The presence of symmetry in the power of two individuals does not exclude the possibility of domination, but it does make it less likely.

3.6. *Freedom as self-determination*

The last dimension of freedom is the one closest to some conceptions of positive freedom as moral freedom³⁴. It is the dimension of freedom enjoyed by individuals who are able to distance themselves from their deeply held beliefs, which determine, among other things, their aspirations and preferences, and to subject them to critical scrutiny, which may even lead to their revision. This requires a capacity for self-reflection and criticism. Individuals who possess such capacities are better equipped to free themselves from beliefs transmitted through education and absorbed by the cultural context in which they were formed, and to resist intentional and unintentional indoctrination.

Freedom as self-determination does not require absolute freedom of will. It is compatible with the idea that the deeply held beliefs of individuals are always at least partly the result of environmental conditioning. However, there is a difference between the condition of an individual who, having been brought up with certain beliefs, has never questioned them – perhaps never having had the opportunity to do so – and has always remained faithful to them, and that of an individual who, having been brought up with the same beliefs, has questioned them, confronted them with other beliefs, and has then either come to affirm them, with a different awareness, or to reject them, replacing them with others. According to the dimension of freedom that interests me here, the second individual is freer than the first.

To refer to this dimension of freedom, I could have used the term 'autonomy', speaking of freedom as autonomy. Many conceptions of autonomy do indeed describe a state similar to the one I have just described. However, the term 'autonomy' is also commonly used to refer to an individual's capacity to assume obligations towards other individuals, whether moral, legal or otherwise. To distinguish the dimension of freedom I am interested in here from this capacity, I prefer to speak of self-determination. The term 'self-determination' also has the advantage of emphasising how, through the exercise of this form of freedom, individuals are able to contribute, together with external factors, to the determination of their own beliefs and thus their own will. One should not think of full self-determination, a determination that is in no way dependent on external factors, but of an increase in the control that individuals have over what they think and what they want.

³³ See for example MILL 1991 [1869]; WOOLF 1938; OKIN 1989.

³⁴ Cf. CHRISTMAN 1991, 2005.

4. Formal powers, capabilities and non-interference

In this section I consider three other possible candidates for the role of dimensions of freedom and try to explain why I have decided not to include them among the dimensions of freedom I have distinguished, even though there is a trace of these notions in ordinary linguistic usage and sometimes more than a trace in the philosophical literature on the concept of freedom.

The first of the dimensions I have excluded is that of freedom as formal power³⁵. Sometimes people mistakenly call “freedom” what is really formal power. Consider someone who claims the “freedom” to marry a person of the same sex³⁶ in a context where same-sex marriage is not provided for by law. On reflection, what is being claimed in this case is not freedom but the legal power to marry a person of the same sex. In most legal systems that do not recognise same-sex marriage, there is no rule prohibiting an individual from marrying another individual of the same sex. Such a rule is not necessary because the act is simply not possible in the absence of the power to make it so, and because it makes no sense to prohibit the impossible.

I think I can safely say that what I have just described is a misuse of the term ‘freedom’, due to an error that is easily explained by referring to the fact that when a legal system grants individuals a power, it generally also grants them the freedom to exercise that power: in legal systems that provide for same-sex marriage, individuals enjoy both the power and the freedom to marry another individual of their own sex. That these are distinct notions is demonstrated by the fact that once the power to marry an individual of one’s own sex has been conferred, the freedom to exercise that power may be restricted by prohibitions, such as the prohibition on marrying a member of one’s own family or the prohibition on bigamy.

The second possible dimension of freedom, which I have chosen not to consider as such, is that which identifies freedom with capability. This exclusion, even more than the previous one, requires justification. There are numerous traces of the use of the identification of freedom and capability in everyday language, and there is no shortage of philosophical conceptions of freedom that make such an identification, sometimes using terms or phrases other than ‘capability’ to refer to the same idea³⁷.

Before discussing this idea, we need to clear up a possible misunderstanding. When we speak of freedom as capability, the term ‘capability’ does not simply refer to the internal capabilities of individuals, but to the combination of internal capabilities – mental and physical – with external circumstances that favour the exercise of those capabilities in order to do what one is free to do, including control over the necessary resources³⁸. In short, it refers to the actual opportunity to do something.

Undoubtedly, the capability or actual opportunity to do something affects the freedom of individuals, especially their freedom of choice. Indeed, as I have said, the freedom of choice of individuals depends on the actual opportunities they enjoy. This does not mean, however, that opportunities and freedom are identical. In my view, the two concepts deserve to be

³⁵ For the concept of a formal power, see HOHFELD 1913’s discussion of legal powers.

³⁶ I am following common usage and referring to sex, although I believe that the issue of marriage is about gender, and specifically legal gender, as evidenced by the fact that in countries that provide for legal gender reassignment but not marriage between persons of the same “sex”, a transgender woman who has obtained legal recognition of her gender identity can marry a man, and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for a transgender man.

³⁷ The same idea can be conveyed by referring to freedom as “ability”, “capacity”, “power”, “possibility”, or by speaking of “substantial” or “real” freedom. Cf. SEN 1992, 1999 *passim*; VAN PARIJS 1995.

³⁸ I take this distinction from Nussbaum, who identifies three levels of capabilities: *basic capabilities*, i.e. the innate equipment that allows an individual to develop internal capabilities under favourable circumstances; *internal capabilities*, i.e. developed capabilities that can be exercised when external circumstances permit; and *combined capabilities*, i.e. internal capabilities plus external circumstances that permit their exercise. Nussbaum identifies combined capabilities with Sen’s “substantial freedoms”. See NUSSBAUM 2011, 20 ff.

distinguished. If individuals have the opportunity to do something, this implies that they are free to choose to do that thing, but the opportunity to do something and the freedom to choose to do something are not the same thing. Opportunities are conditions for the freedom of choice of individuals. One could also speak of freedom of choice as supervening over the set of opportunities that an individual enjoys.

The reason I have not considered including freedom as capability (or opportunity) among the dimensions of freedom is that such a notion does not seem to me to add anything to the idea of freedom of choice, and any statement that suggests the idea of freedom as capability or incapacity as unfreedom can easily be translated into terms of freedom of choice. So, for example, the statement that human beings are not free to fly (without means) can be interpreted, without significant loss of meaning, as meaning that the opportunity to fly (without means) is not part of the set of opportunities from which human beings can choose.

Finally, I have chosen not to consider the idea of freedom as non-interference as a separate and distinct dimension of freedom, although the idea that freedom coincides with non-interference is very common in the philosophical debate on freedom. According to the theorists of negative freedom³⁹ negative freedom does indeed coincide with the absence of interference that might prevent individuals from doing what they want to do, or make it more difficult or costly for them to do so, or with the absence of a certain kind of interference: interference due to the actions of other individuals; unjustified interference, and so on.

Note that interferences that make an action more difficult or costly are in a sense also preventing interferences. That's because, while they don't prevent the action made more difficult or costly to the extent that it remains possible for the agent to perform that action, interferences that affect an action by making it more difficult or more costly affect the agent's overall freedom, i.e. the set of sets of compossible actions⁴⁰ available to the agent, by eliminating some sets from that set and thus preventing them. That is true at least under the reasonable assumption of a limited set of economic and non-economic resources at the agent's disposal.

The reason why freedom as non-interference does not appear as a separate dimension of freedom in my analysis is that I have preferred to elaborate the insights underlying this idea into two separate dimensions: freedom as non-prevention (which could also be called freedom as non-preventive interference) and freedom of choice. I think it is appropriate to distinguish between interference by others that deliberately prevents individuals from doing, achieving or becoming what they want, and interference that, without preventing individuals from doing, achieving or becoming anything in particular, reduces their range of opportunities and thus their freedom of choice. These two different forms of interference reduce our freedom in ways that raise different moral concerns as I will discuss in the next section.

5. *The relationships between the six dimensions of freedom*

There are relationships between the different dimensions of freedom that I have distinguished. It is possible to group the six dimensions into three pairs whose elements are related.

Freedom as non-subordination has a relationship with freedom as non-subjection similar to that which freedom as permission has with freedom as non-prevention. In both cases, the first dimension is formal, the second substantial, and yet they are related. Although a lack of formal freedom does not always correspond to a lack of substantial freedom, where it does, unfreedom

³⁹ See the references in footnote 6 above.

⁴⁰ I take the idea of compossibility from STEINER 1994, who uses it to speak of "compossible rights". A set of compossible actions is a set of actions that don't exclude each other, so that all of them can be realized over time. Sets of compossible actions are what CARTER 1999, ch. 1 calls "act-combinations".

as subordination generally corresponds to a state of unfreedom as subjection to the subject to whom one is formally subordinated, and unfreedom as absence of permission sometimes corresponds to unfreedom as prevention.

There is also a parallelism between freedom of choice and freedom as self-determination. In this case, however, the parallelism cannot be described in terms of the formal/substantial dichotomy. Both freedom of choice and freedom as self-determination are substantial dimensions of freedom. The parallelism between them depends on the fact that freedom as self-determination entails a kind of freedom of choice in the internal forum: the (always limited) freedom to choose one's own ends and to contribute to the shaping of one's own desires, partially emancipating oneself from external conditioning.

Although there are relationships between the six dimensions of freedom, they are not entirely reducible to one another.

The first two dimensions of freedom are distinguished from all others by their formal character, which depends on moral, legal or other systems of norms. To the extent that compliance with the norms of these systems is enforced through the use of sanctions, the two formal dimensions of freedom can lead to substantial restrictions on freedom, but they remain formal and thus ontologically distinct from all other dimensions that are substantial. In particular, while there is a parallelism between the two formal dimensions and freedom as non-prevention and freedom as non-subjection, it would be a mistake to reduce the formal dimensions of freedom to these two substantial dimensions. There is a formal sense of freedom in which, even if the norms depriving an individual of freedom as non-subordination or freedom as permission were actually ineffective, individuals deprived of freedom by those norms could still be said not to be free. The fact that this sense is formal does not make it any less real. As neo-republican theorists insist, slaves remain slaves even if there is no possibility of their masters exercising the formal power they have over them, and a prohibition restricts the freedom of individuals even if they can transgress it and even if they risk no sanction. The value of the formal dimension of freedom is above all expressive, symbolic. The denial of freedom to slaves expresses a lack of respect for them, it is a violation of their dignity as human beings. And the same is true in many cases where the restriction of freedom is not justified, of the deprivation of freedom that depends on prohibitions.

Moreover, the connection between freedom as permission and freedom as non-prevention is much less close than one might think. In most cases, the fact that an action is forbidden does not mean that it would be prevented if someone tried to do it. In fact, in many cases it cannot be prevented and the sanction can only work after the prohibited act has been committed. Sanctions do not prevent individuals from carrying out the actions that are the subject of the sanctions, they do not involve real prevention. What financial sanctions do is to reduce the freedom of future choice of the individuals they affect by reducing the resources available to them. Even when the sanction involves real prevention, as in the case of imprisonment, the behaviour that is prevented is not the behaviour that is sanctioned, which can be sanctioned precisely because it has not been prevented.

If I had to choose one dimension of freedom that could be completely reduced to the others, my choice would undoubtedly fall on freedom as non-prevention. On the one hand, prevention can be seen as a particularly direct form of domination, symptomatic of a state of subjection. On the other hand, prevention is one of the many causes that can limit an individual's freedom of choice: when individuals are physically prevented from doing something, the possibility of doing it is not part of the set of opportunities that define their freedom of choice.

If I have nevertheless chosen to identify freedom as non-prevention as a separate dimension of freedom, it is because I consider prevention – being physically prevented from doing something by the deliberate action of other individuals – to be a particularly serious form of restriction of individual freedom that requires special justification. The way in which I have

circumscribed the idea of prevention by referring it to intentional conduct that has a direct relationship to the prevented action makes the thesis of its particular gravity more plausible. The kind of intentional action by which individuals can deliberately prevent other individuals from doing what they want creates a kind of unfreedom that requires a stricter justification, and in any case a different kind of justification, than the justification required by the actions of individuals who have the *de facto* power to restrict the freedom of choice of other individuals and do so unintentionally.

It is clear that if an individual stands on the threshold of a room door and effectively prevents an individual who wishes to leave the room from doing so, the first individual is restricting the freedom of choice of the second who does not have the opportunity to leave the room. The second individual may have valid reasons for asking the first individual to move in order to facilitate passage. But the fact of standing on the threshold of a door and preventing passage is surely less deplorable and more forgivable than the act of someone deliberately locking someone else in a room. It is only when the individual preventing passage refuses to move when asked that the prevention, which becomes or is revealed to be intentional, defines a form of unfreedom that raises moral issues different from those raised by the mere absence of freedom of choice.

Freedom as non-subjection also affects the individuals' freedom of choice. The absence of this freedom exposes individuals to the risk that their freedom of choice will be restricted by other individuals, either intentionally or unintentionally, sometimes in dominating way that doesn't take their interests fairly into account. But exposure to this risk is a restriction of freedom, even if the risk does not materialise and so freedom of choice is not actually affected.

As for freedom as self-determination, the absence of this dimension of freedom can be a consequence of the absence of other dimensions of freedom. Consider how the absence of freedom of thought, research, speech and the press can limit the circulation of ideas and the confrontation of ideas that fosters the development of self-reflective and critical capacities. The same is true of freedom from subjection. Some forms of subjection, involving the risk of indoctrination, deception and psychological manipulation, put individuals at greater risk of being prevented from developing the self-reflective and critical capacities necessary for freedom as self-determination.

Conversely, freedom as self-determination can lead to liberation from those forms of subjection which are only effective because they depend on some form of internal submission of the individuals to the power of other individuals, or from those prohibitions whose validity depends largely on the acceptance of the individuals who recognise them as valid: the clearest examples are norms of religious or sexual morality which, in a social context characterised by tolerance and pluralism, are not supported by strong external sanctions and whose acceptance depends largely on the internalisation of these norms by individuals.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have proposed an analysis of the concept of freedom by distinguishing six dimensions of freedom: freedom as non-subordination, freedom as permission, freedom as non-prevention, freedom of choice, freedom as non-subjection, and freedom as self-determination. As I argued in the last section, I think that these dimensions of freedom, while interrelated, are not fully reducible to one another. My intention has been to provide an account of freedom that does justice to the complexity of the concept as it is used in ordinary language. I don't pretend that my description of the concept of freedom is the only possible one, or that it is superior to other alternative descriptions. I think that just as an object can be described in many different ways, drawing in the relevant distinctions in different ways, reflecting the sensibilities and

interests of the person describing it, so too can concepts. The merits of the different analyses shouldn't be judged comparatively, but on the basis of their ability to illuminate relevant aspects of the concept being analysed. While in section 4 I explained why I decided to exclude other candidates for the role of dimensions of freedom from my analysis, I am also open to the possibility of revising my analysis in the future by including new dimensions⁴¹. Conceptual analysis is a job without an end.

Underlying my analysis of the concept of freedom is, of course, an interest in freedom as a political value and ideal. In this paper I have said little about the value of the different dimensions of freedom that I have distinguished and almost nothing about the role of public institutions, including legal institutions, in promoting them. In section 2 I mentioned Berlin's view that politics should focus on protecting negative freedom and ignore positive freedom. Berlin's view can be understood by considering his personal experience of totalitarian regimes that oppressed people while pretending to liberate them. Nevertheless, I think the idea that politics and public institutions should be concerned only with negative freedom – essentially freedom as non-prevention and freedom of choice – is mistaken. I think that all dimensions of freedom are valuable and that politics should take them all into account, albeit in different ways and through different institutions. Of course, this complicates matters because there could be trade-offs between different dimensions of freedom, and one would have to decide which dimension to prioritise. Nevertheless, I am convinced that a free society is one that promotes the freedom of its members in all its dimensions. As to how a society could or should do this, I must leave that question for another occasion.

⁴¹ This work is a development and revision of the analysis of the concept of freedom that I proposed in RIVA 2020, 55 ff. On that occasion I distinguished only two dimensions of freedom.

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