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Freedom

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Testing Freedom

Ontological Considerations¹

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Semantics and/versus ontology

Who or what can be free, or not free? The question may seem mind-boggling on close inspection. To the extent that meaning is defined through reference, or acts of naming, different meanings of freedom deployed in daily life derive their significance from specific and contingent instructions that allow the particularities of freedom to be constituted. Hence, determining the everyday meaning of freedom involves an analysis of practical power effects, as well as the struggles over which instructions, or policies, should be followed in order to determine who and what falls under the category of 'the free', and what or who should be excluded from it. So we must begin by exposing ourselves to what Malinowski called the 'universe of semantic chaos' in which 'freedom' appears if we are to hope to approach

freedom itself (1947). Further, this article argues that in order to address the complexities of freedom to their limits, an exploration not only of semantics (considerations of meaning) but also of its relation to ontology (considerations of existence) cannot be neglected.

What possible definition of freedom could anthropologists provide that adequately combines semantic and ontological aspects taking most advantage of the possibilities fostered by ethnographic research methods? To begin with we suggest that it helps to make certain 'pre-theoretical' commitments more explicit: what is the presupposed relationship between freedom, the particular languages in which fieldwork is conducted, the act of translation, and the different ontologies indexed?

Notice how the following description of the Pintupi of the Western Australian Desert, extracted from its

ethnographic context, might be understood to apply almost anywhere:

‘Pintupi life is highly personalized; for people to abstract from the intimate and familiar is unusual. They place emphasis on individuals, their autonomy, and their capacity to choose courses of action’ (Myers 1992: 18).

To take a quite different example, the Confucian concept *ziyou* – if we are able momentarily to ignore radical differences of social scale and hierarchy – has a more than passing resemblance to those Pintupi principles. *Ziyou* is often glossed as ‘freedom’, but fits well, arguably better, with ‘autonomy’ since, literally, *ziyou* translates from Chinese as ‘self-follow’, a principle, in other words, of following one’s own route (Li 2014). As with the Pintupi, however, the kind of autonomy involved is understood to unfold out of a traditional range of values. And herein lies a problem – ‘autonomy’ may seem to cover similar territory to ‘freedom’, and ‘autonomy’ may appear to be replayed across different social settings, but perhaps this is an illusion created by our attempts at translation.

Take a different example, the Hindi term *swaraj*, which is likewise often glossed as ‘freedom’, was co-opted during the struggle for Indian independence to mean both ‘self-rule’ and ‘home rule’ (with resulting ambiguities). For Gandhi, *swaraj* meant independence from colonial power, but had the deeper implication of cultivating capacities for personal self-governance as opposed to relinquishing control of oneself to the state (there are echoes of Kant here). In Gandhi’s view, as with Malinowski in *Freedom and Civilization*, the only

means to counter-balance state coercion was through existing practices of voluntary association; the free life of the fellow villager. *Swaraj* would not be achieved merely by transferring power to an independent Indian government (1910). All this suggests that the meaning of *swaraj* was not beyond debate. Either way, the matter turns out to be more complicated since the prefix *sva* in *swaraj*, though it suggests a personal pronoun, does not translate directly as ‘self’ – instead it is closer to ‘own’, hence its bifurcating use to mean both ‘self’ and ‘home’. Vaidyanathan has therefore argued that, rather than ‘self-rule’, a truer translation of *swaraj* into English may be ‘proper rule’ which paradoxically has the potential to mean the opposite of either freedom or autonomy (Vaidyanathan 1989). Note that *αὐτός* in ancient Greek means ‘self’ but also ‘same’: Orlando Patterson (1991) has argued that the Greek understanding of ‘self’ and hence the idea of self-governance evolved dialectically from the distinction between slaves who were ruled, and citizens who ruled themselves.

During Lino e Silva’s fieldwork in one of the largest Brazilian slums, his interlocutors almost never used the word ‘freedom’ in their daily lives. Since the ethnography was conducted in Portuguese, people spoke of ‘*liberdade*’, ‘*liberada*’, ‘*libertação*’ and not of ‘freedom’. This may sound like an obvious point, but many difficulties arise from it. Peter Gow (in Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016) notes the various candidates for translating what we might take to be an antonym of ‘freedom’ – ‘slavery’ – amongst the Piro. Each of these meanings has valences, including notions of kinship affiliation, absent from the liberal understanding of slavery, he argues. As we will see, in English ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ can be subtly incommensurable. In other languages,

such as Portuguese, the challenge is the opposite: '*liberdade*' could mean both 'liberty' and 'freedom'.

In fact, theorising the indeterminacy of translation could help to further our ontological understanding of freedom. If we accept the position defended by Willard von Quine (1981), who argues that no translation is ever absolutely determined, the awareness that 'freedom' is not, for example, isomorphic with, for example, '*liberdade*' seems to become both clearer and also less problematic. Quine (ibid.: 23) explains that this indeterminacy reflects the fact that 'two conflicting manuals of translation can both do justice to all dispositions of behaviour, and that, in such case, there is no fact of the matter of which manual is right'. To that extent, 'freedom' is understood as an imprecise translation of '*liberdade*'. The expectation, however, is that the replication of ethnographic instances in which the word '*liberdade*' is put into practice in 'the field' may help to reduce some of this unavoidable indeterminacy, so that an equivalence between the two terms can be more precisely delineated by each one of us, even if never completely resolved. Quine (ibid.: 20) reminds us: 'The translation adopted arrests the free-floating reference of the alien terms only relatively to the free-floating reference of our own terms, by linking the two'.

In her 2007 essay 'Alternative Freedoms', Caroline Humphrey gives centrality to the problem of translation. Humphrey intentionally brackets off discussions regarding what philosophers have had to say about freedom. Instead, she emphasizes how some people in Russia, with whom she had been working for years, referred to ideas similar to 'freedom'. In Humphrey's (2007: 1) words:

'I want to use our word 'freedom' – whose multiple meanings will be implicit and left to your imaginations – to elicit, as it were, a range of ideas held in Russia'.

However, she does not really address in depth the problem of how meanings left to imagination could still elicit certain ideas that the Russians held on freedom. We should not drop our guard, Humphrey indicates, we should not assume that even a good or reasonable semantic match allows us access to the same object.

When it comes to ethnographies of freedom in the lives of 'others', then, if the researcher proposes to grasp the existence of freedom as an object of ethnographic research, the conditions of possibility for such an object to exist need to be somehow established. In most cases, researchers are happy to assume that a given meaning of freedom (often not spelled out) is a good enough theoretical basis to be deployed in their search for 'freedom' (or 'autonomy') in the research setting. For example, say an anthropologist has the following in mind: 'freedom means X'. Having at some point experienced this specific 'X meaning' of freedom, during research, the ethnographer proceeds onward to look for objects similar enough to what the meaning 'X' allows as 'freedom'. Importantly, this is done independently of whether the others involved would necessarily call 'X' freedom, or not. Therefore, by encountering certain 'freedoms' in the field whose existence was initially allowed by 'X', the anthropologist proceeds to finding out what linguistic sign would best refer to 'X' in the specific language.

The advantage of this strategy is clear: translation becomes a matter of finding an object whose existence

is allowed by the imaginative range offered by 'X' as well as a specific linguistic signifier to be used to refer to it. This approach remediates a situation in which some people could be argued to have no freedom if they do not have the word 'freedom' (or an assumed direct translation of it) in their language. The disadvantage with this approach, however, is that it assumes *a priori* certain meanings for freedom that are not just difficult to spell out, but if they were possible to spell out, they would reveal that those 'X' meanings attributed to freedom are often the ones that the anthropologist already knows, and not necessarily meanings created by the people with whom the ethnography has been conducted. In an extreme scenario we could end up with 'native' objects and signs for a freedom that could have more meaning as 'freedom' to people foreign to that context than to people in it. It seems at least possible that the reiteration of 'autonomy' in so many settings may indicate a pre-theoretical assumption on the part of the anthropologist; but what, in turn, does that imply? Some of the assumptions involved seem to be directly connected to how the self or subjectivity is thought to be constituted and how freedom is expected to feature in this constitution.

The subject of freedom

As the last examples show, there are clear dangers in assuming too much about what people mean by the seemingly shared ideas – 'freedom', 'autonomy', 'liberty'. Returning specifically to autonomy, firstly, the significance of 'self' – the 'auto-' in 'autonomy' – varies radically; ethnographic surveys of what a 'self' is offer a

veritable smorgasbord. To take one instructive case: Marriott (1976) has argued that the image of an island-like individual self in a sea of social activity often encountered in Western thought is largely alien to the mainstream of Indian culture where instead the view of what it means to be human is fundamentally socio-centric. Self is here not a causal force in its own right – it is not the self-propelling soul or *autokineton* of Platonic philosophy – rather its consistency derives from the relations from which it is composed. When the self becomes isolated from these relations (by disease for example) it manifests this not in the form of a stripped down or bare individuality, but rather as a problematic 'dividuality' awaiting personal reintegration within the social matrix – the soul-body can only be made whole again through reconnection with others. It turns out that this kind of relational view of the self is as widespread in the ethnographic literature as is the emphasis on autonomy – but perhaps it is equally as prone to problems of translation. In contrast to these social-holistic perspectives, Western notions of an autonomous self that causes its own free actions seem to beg a question regarding what it is that causes this capacity for free action (see, for example, Li 2014). The special philosophy of 'free will' has given a unique twist to much European and North American thought, especially since the European Enlightenment – foregrounding a problem or conflict that seems either absent in other worldviews, or as presenting an illusion to be overcome, as in Buddhism (Gowans 2003: 25). Indeed, Buddhist practices of liberating the self from its indebtedness to past and future, ego and other, suggest something of a polarity with a Western eschatology that understands these relations as precisely

constitutive of ethical 'free will', as we will see below.

As mentioned, the difficulty of disentangling 'freedom' from the philosophy of 'free will' probably gives one reason why anthropologists have preferred to talk about the 'autonomy' of the people they work with rather than their 'freedom'. Certainly, if we are to take autonomy to be something like a universally available idea, then we will have to cut loose from the assumption that 'autonomy' and 'free will' are in effect the same. The evidence suggests that autonomy offers a broad if not consistent foundation for the much more historically and culturally specific concept of free will, but not the other way round. Nineteenth Century teleologists such as Hegel argued that free will was a necessary intellectual outcome of the dialectical struggle for autonomy at the apex of which is the self-governance of the fully individuated human being within a state. The contemporary position has to be much less secure to say the least.

If, then, the dimension of 'self' – the 'auto' in autonomy – has its own indeterminacy, so too inevitably does the notion of 'governance' – νόμος, lawfulness – that is the second aspect of the word. The problem of 'lawfulness' or governance cannot appear in the same way for someone who considers their life to be self-caused as it does for one who understands their personal actions as an outgrowth, or fluxional expression, of custom or of social relations. Historically, the idea of self-government seems often to emerge as a reaction to restrictions on following a traditional pathway, which in turn gives rise to an assertion of positive autonomy or self-determination. Some of the social forces involved are captured in this description by Lowie of Plains Indian individualism:

The worst Crow insult was to tell a man that he had no relatives, for it meant that he was a social nobody subject to abuse. To a spirited lad this taunt, however, was a challenge: he could court spiritual blessings, distinguish himself in fighting, gain wealth, and ultimately shame his detractors (Lowie 1954: 124).

It is not 'free will' that is being claimed here, though this might be implied, what is at issue is the reintegration of someone back into the mainstream of community life, which has been cut off in one direction, by way of other kinds of valued relations. We can note, in this regard, that in Europe conflicts over religious autonomy were rife long before the liberal enlightenment analytic of existential freedom gained traction. For example, the 'antinomianism' of sixteenth Century Protestants built on centuries of ideological struggle for religious self-governance vis-à-vis an incomprehensible, exclusive and socially distant church hierarchy.

We should expect to find then, despite the broad generality of the idea of autonomy that the pragmatic contexts and meanings accompanying it vary dramatically. To take one example, for the Papuan Kapauku, according to Pospisil (1978: 84-88), individual freedom is an all-important cultural idea and this extends into how the relationship between soul and body is constituted – for Kapauku soul and body are autonomous agents whose cooperative efforts bring about individuality in the full sense – neither can achieve this on its own. A soul can dream in an inert body, bodily action can continue even in the absence of awareness, but neither soul nor body is a fully conscious person except in coalition. If, though, soul and body fail to acknowledge each other's autonomy this will lead to sickness.

Likewise if the individual is forced to work for others, or their movements are curtailed by being jailed, these restraints can cause fatal illness due to the body's resistance to compulsion and the effect of this bodily revolt on the soul (ibid.). The Kapauku have stood out in the ethnographic record as a small-scale society characterized by values (individualism, personal freedom, commercial competitiveness) more usually vaunted amongst business-people in grand-scale commercial settings. Despite this seeming cultural familiarity though, as Pospisil shows, the integration of autonomy into their other cosmological ideas is distinctive.

It is worth noting in this light that the relative 'autonomy' that a given person or community is able to claim offers a vital sign of how they are understood and valued by others around them. For example, Pipyrou (in Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016) demonstrates through her research on civil society organizations in South Italy how boundaries and processes of authorizing autonomy are constantly open to extension and contraction. Similarly, in a landmark decision, in May 2015, a New York judge issued a writ of *habeas corpus* on two chimpanzees held at laboratories in a local university, Stony Brook. Initially at least, the judgement seemed to indicate willingness on the part of the judge to acknowledge arguments made by a group advocating 'non-human rights' that the primates were 'autonomous and self-determining being[s]'.² The debate involved is telling at many levels, not least because it seems to take for granted that everyone concerned knows what 'autonomy' means in practice and the only remaining question is how to extend this idea to 'non-humans'. As we have already observed, this is hardly the case because, while autonomy taken loosely has seemingly universal

valence, its pragmatic and situational ramifications can be radically distinctive: so much so that what is viewed as a move toward autonomy in one situation can be quite literally sickening and soul-destroying in another. In *Hind Swaraj*, Ghandi argues that the large number of British women engaged in paid work, and likewise the contemporary suffragette movement, was indicative, not of the growing autonomy of women, but instead of a deep moral sickness and malaise in a British way of life that was, he suggests, bound to destroy itself (1909: 24). It may be a necessary feature of any particular discourse of freedom that it forecloses as much as it opens.

Hence, we might say that, at least in most cultures that we are aware of, people seem to agree that autonomy is a valuable human (and non-human) good for those deemed to deserve it. Nevertheless, both cross-culturally and even intra-culturally too, there may be little agreement about what this good looks like in context, even less in practice. Importantly, this is not a problem of semantics only. It is, above all, an ontological question.

Possible freedoms

What I am afraid of about humanism is that it presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom. I think there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is dogmatically represented on every side of the political rainbow: the Left, the Centre, the Right (Foucault 1988: 15).

These comments by Foucault contain a degree of cryptic optimism as well as elements of a theory about the conditions for freedom, both of which demand consideration. Foucault takes it as self-evident that ‘humanism’ and ideas about ‘freedom’ are interconnected historically. However, there are more freedoms available than we currently imagine and the connection between freedom and ethics can be invented anew; either way, humanistic ethics in its current dogmatic version has perhaps outlived itself. Sundering humanism from freedom, as Foucault elaborates elsewhere, calls for a rethinking of the self and the techniques that go into creating it.

One response might be that there are already a multitude of possibilities present under the word ‘freedom’; indeed this is perhaps where Malinowski’s sense of ‘semantic chaos’ associated with the word originates. Freedom, if it is often used interchangeably with either autonomy or liberty, has, to say the least, very varied ontic resonances of its own. A philological approach may help a little in perceiving this underlying plurality: ‘freedom’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘liberty’ have substantially different derivations and these differences in history and usage are suggestive. In English, ‘autonomy’ indicates a capacity for self-rule, while ‘freedom’ suggests something else; not only action that goes unimpeded, but feelings and behaviour that are spirited, generous and whole-hearted. Cognate words including ‘frank’ and ‘friendly’ supply insights, as do the old Norse word *frja*, to love, Old Saxon *friohan*, to court or woo, not to mention contemporary Dutch, *vrijen*, to woo or caress. When European philosophies of ‘freedom’ first began to be intellectualized in Japan, the Dutch word, *vrijheid*, was transliterated directly

into Japanese becoming ‘*furabeido*’; Hideko Mitsui shows that this did indeed open up ‘new possibilities’ (in Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016).

Liberty, which derives from Latin *liber*, a free person, is rooted etymologically in the idea of growing amongst a people (Indo-European, *leudh-* to grow up; people; free (Shipley 1984: 220)). From this viewpoint liberties derive from growing with, and hence having rights in, a community. By comparison, Humphrey notes that *svoboda*, one of the Russian words translated as ‘freedom’ indexes a ‘*Svoi*’ or ‘We’ who are ‘full members of the patriarchal and kin-based community’ suggesting something more like the root meaning of ‘liberty’ than ‘freedom’ (2007: 2, note the resemblance with debates around ‘*sva*’ and ‘*swaraj*’). ‘Liberty’ has an adjectival form, ‘liberal’, but ‘liberal’ and ‘free’ have only limited semantic overlap in English. In the case of ‘liberty’ and ‘autonomy’ the idea of regulation by norm or law is a necessary element of the definition, but this is not so with ‘freedom’. However, we can add to this the complicating fact that ever since the Enlightenment, at least, the liberality of a society has been expected to evidence itself in the ‘irregularity, unpredictability and asymmetry’ of its constitutional arrangements (Simmel in Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016: 81).

When, in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau defines true liberty (*liberté*) as ‘obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves’ (1963 [1726]: 16) he might equally be defining autonomy. Indeed, Kant turns Rousseau’s view into his own logic of the autonomous (*autonome*) will. ‘Autonomous’ and ‘free’ correspond more closely in meaning than ‘free’ and ‘liberal’, but, as we have already seen, what they bring to mind is subtly different too. ‘Free’, draws most directly on the image of a self that is

able to do whatever it wants to the fullest extent, wholeheartedly; liberty evokes, *inter alia*, the distributive rights of a collectivity. Autonomy is as much a mode of self-discipline as it is a rejection of external rule. Nonetheless post-Enlightenment philosophy has come to see 'freedom' and 'moral law' or 'ethics' as inextricably linked; it is not only that 'what makes an act moral also makes it free' (Taylor 1985: 327) but, vice versa, 'what makes an act free also makes it moral'. Not so in everyday thought and parlance where 'freedom' can have non-moral private significance expressed by 'I'll do as I like'. Nigel Rapport argues that 'freedom encompasses the sense in which individuality exists beyond the reach of others' comprehension' (in Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016: 51), thus also beyond their configurations of morality.

When opposed to liberty or autonomy, then, in English usage at least, 'freedom' appears an unruly and, quite literally, underdetermined (or ultimately indeterminate) concept around which philosophers and others have placed a distinct moral and logical frame. Which ever way we look at it, playing up the distinctions and slippages between 'liberty', 'autonomy' and 'freedom' should remind us, if nothing else, that the words can carry unconsidered ontic freight into even the most carefully thought-through theoretical discourse. In so doing what is shown is that there are already always available multiple presences, orientations and 'possibilities' for 'freedom' of the kind Foucault touches on, however vague these may seem. However, this in turn takes us to the relation by which 'what makes an act moral also makes it free' and vice versa; that is to say, the philosophy and politics of 'free will'.

The politics of 'free will'

Hannah Arendt holds that we have St. Augustine to blame for the special status of 'free will' in Western philosophy (1978). In his Confessions, Augustine sets up 'willing' as the dimension of self that unifies and organises 'being' and 'knowing' when the time comes to act in the world. Only because I will does the awareness of what I am and what I know take the shape of a unified self that acts definitively. Unlike God, a human self cannot know itself absolutely or transcendently: forced to know the world *in* time, hence blinded from absolute truth, the self must depend on its free will to make its own path, for good or ill (Arendt 1978: 84-110).

If Arendt is right, then Augustine has bequeathed, at least to Westerners, a truly multi-layered epistemological conundrum. It may be much less easy than we might guess to escape some of those humanist ideas about freedom that Foucault refers to. Either way, Augustine's argument is further embedded in a much deeper and more widely ramifying set of cosmological assumptions about the place of human beings in the world – at the centre of which is a particular myth of origin. Here is how Fromm describes and analyses it:

The biblical myth of man's expulsion from Paradise [...] identifies the beginning of human history with an act of choice, but it puts all emphasis on the sinfulness of this first act of freedom [...]. Man [...] acts against God's command, he breaks through the state of harmony with nature of which he is part From the standpoint of the church [...] this is sin. From the standpoint of man, however, this is the beginning of human freedom [...] freeing himself

from coercion [...] committing a sin is [...] the first *human* act (Fromm 1965: 49-50).

For humans living in history (that is, acting *in time*), understanding the world begins with a singular choice, a free act, a fully human act, also the first sinful act because it defies the order of the cosmos. Freedom may suggest love, abundance and an enthusiastic state of indeterminacy, but, cosmologically speaking, free action is sin, defiance and ignorance. As Fromm argues, in Abrahamic doctrine, the relationship of divine order and human freedom is irretrievably paradoxical. Compare the above statement with one derived from anthropologist Paul Radin's fieldwork with a group of hunter-agriculturalists, the Winnebago:

The right [...] to freedom of expression [amongst the Winnebago] is never for a moment questioned [...]. Free expression of thought was the order of the day and was viewed as a purely private concern, system-mongering or a systematic theology, for instance, was quite useless [...]. It remained the expression of a particular man or, at best, of a particular group (Radin 1957 [1927]: 57).

As Radin argues, for the Winnebago at least, personally held thoughts and theories posed no particular problem to community life. There were in this setting no book-based codes of ethics against which freely formulated ideas could or should be judged. Either way, personally held interpretations had little effect on the fundamental needs and flows of social life. Freedom was taken for granted, but 'free will' did not here arise as a distinct question because thinking and acting did

not happen in the shadow of the Word of God. This, he noted, was in stark contrast to those literate cultural settings where the written word often takes on the aspect of an absolute objectivity against which subjectively held thoughts and actions must be measured and judged – with a resultant 'distortion in our whole psychic life' (Radin 1957 [1927]: 61). In Augustine's and others' accounts of the experience of monotheism, the question, theologically at least, becomes one of how to conform out of the finitude of one's own life to the divine word given how little knowledge of God's intention is subjectively available. It should be noted that while freedom of thought and a high emphasis on autonomy in people of the plains like the Winnebago, individual actions were policed where they posed a threat to communal life – to the food supply in particular (compare with Lowie 1954: 126).

As Fortes shows in his analyses of the ancestor-worshipping Tallensi, the key psychological conundrums involved in the notion of free will are not in any absolute way confined to monotheistic cultures. Tallensi eldest sons worry constantly about whether their decisions and actions are in conformity with the will of their male ancestors (1959). However, as Gellner likewise indicates, it has been in monotheistic settings – where the holy book and the sword combine in a single mode of domination – that the paradoxical qualities of 'free will' have taken on a particularly hard political outline (1988). And, as Chris Kelty points out, this writing of free-will into the source-code of cultural life continues quite literally into the Western present through the committed work of internet programmers (in Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016). All this is of some relevance in thinking about Radin's case study. If

‘freedom of expression’ amongst the Winnebago changes little about the social situation – that is, if it makes no authentic difference to how people lead their social lives – then is it really freedom at all? Malinowski (1947) reserves some of his harshest criticism for Boas who, along somewhat similar lines, proposes that to be free is to feel in harmony with one’s culture (in Anshen 1942: 379). By that standard, Malinowski responds caustically, the person who has fully incorporated Nazi indoctrination is free.

Free will, as commentators like Foucault, and indeed many others, have pointed out, describes a special historical configuration of epistemological concerns that defines the situation of freedom in a certain way. Even so, it is difficult, looking out at the world from within the field where those concerns operate, not to question the validity of other understandings of freedom. If someone seems to be absent of a kind of constraint that I feel in my life (as when Radin describes the Winnebago as feeling no restriction on expressing their diverse personal worldviews), does that mean that they are positively free (see Berlin 1969), or am I simply projecting a concern of my own onto their way of life? Malinowski confronts (or perhaps parries) this problem when he argues that purely subjective understandings of freedom, ones based on how or whether people imagine themselves to be free or not, can never answer the question of the social value of freedom. Freedom for Malinowski has the ontological weight of an objective element of, and an increment in, customary social action; what people may or may not think about freedom (its semantics) is of little consequence compared to what they actually do, how, in other words, freedom is built into their patterns of social action.

Here we might respond, based on our previous discussion, that Malinowski is really talking less about ‘freedom’ than about ‘liberty’. Indeed, Malinowski’s view of freedom as a social ‘surplus’ available to people who share a common language, customs, laws and techniques fits exactly with the etymology of ‘liberty’, but rather less well with the unruly and charismatic concept of freedom. The degree to which mid-Twentieth Century social anthropologists thought that the subjective, imaginative or existential aspects of freedom were irrelevant or detrimental to their concerns is striking. Leach (1963) violently disagrees with Malinowski’s functionalist view of freedom, but he is equally indifferent to how people might feel or think about their own freedoms; he is only interested in the socially objective side – freedom is relevant only as an objective political datum or symbol in a given social system. And his objective view is a cynical one. The social orientation toward freedom is largely a myth though in small-scale societies like the Kapauku, the individual can sometimes be ‘moderately free because his rulers are incompetent rather than because they are benevolent’ (1963: 81). We have seen that ‘liberty’ may describe better the public and objective aspect of freedom; but we also need room to consider freedom in other ways; ways that Leach and Malinowski would want to rule out.

It is because subjective freedom has been ruled out of discussion that the question of what composes it still arises. ‘Free will’ is not the same as subjective ‘freedom’; it is a special theory of how human individuality plays out in a world where the rules must be somehow distinguished ‘through a glass darkly’. The problem here is that since anthropologists in the phase of disciplinary consolidation ignored subjective experience in

favour of analyses of cultural or social pattern, the 'freedom' in 'free will' (falling as it does between the disciplinary stools of psychology and anthropology) remained unexplored (Laidlaw 2014).

Freedom between imagination and bodily action

For years, I have dreamed of a liberated anthropology. By 'liberated' I mean free from ... a systematic dehumanizing of the human subjects of study, regarding them as the bearers of an impersonal 'culture', or wax to be imprinted with 'cultural patterns', or as determined by social, cultural or social psychological 'forces', 'variables', or 'pressures' of various kinds.

Victor Turner (1979: 60).

Victor Turner here reacts strongly against the idea that only the objective cultural pattern counts when understanding social life. Instead, he invokes the concept of a 'liberated anthropology' where social life is envisaged as an unfolding improvisatory drama, rather than as a closed system; a drama in which subjective free-play is crucial. But, though the counter-modernist ideas that Turner talks about have been much discussed in anthropology, it is not obvious that they have led to a considerably greater critical understanding of the inter-relationship between 'cultural patterns' and freedom as a dimension of subjective experience.

Are there ways of understanding these two aspects as part of the same picture? Or, are we condemned always to divide the subjective from the objective, social

forces from subjectivity, perhaps inevitably reducing one to the other? When we talk about our 'sense of freedom', that is when we dive into the existential experiencing of freedom in the way that Malinowski wanted to rule out, we find that this sense is closely bundled with other features of consciousness more broadly. In particular our feelings of freedom seem to be bound up with the special relation between reflectively imagining the world and existing bodily and materially in it. Lev Vygotsky gives an illustration of this in his discussion of the play-learning of children:

The difference between the practical intelligence of children and animals is that children are capable of reconstructing their perception and thus *freeing themselves from the given structure of the field* (Vygotsky 1978: 35, emphasis added).

It is precisely what happens during and immediately after this moment of imaginative abstraction that indicates the stage of learning that the child has reached. Vygotsky refers to this as the zone of 'proximal development' (1978: 86). He is working with a classic definition of play as an imaginative activity, where imagination is defined as the capacity to re-present something in the mind which is at that moment absent to the senses. Given what we now know about play amongst animals we may question the special status Vygotsky awards human infants in this area. However, for the purposes of this discussion, Vygotsky is making an important link between the feeling and meaning of freedom and the capacity to imagine. Play involves children in the important imaginative work of 'freeing themselves' from reality in order to remake it in their

own minds. In this way learning entails a sense (and sensing) of freedom. For children, play, manipulation of the object world is also freedom from the material constraints that the world presents – the resistance the world presents as a ‘given structure’.

More could be said on how ‘freedom’ is like ‘play’. For now, we can note that this insight into the role of freedom in subjective experiencing takes us in a very different direction to the view (or absence of view) provided by classic anthropology that Turner highlighted. The special analytical status that Vygotsky gives to freedom in combination with imagining is also present in a widely held understanding that the most easily available kind of freedom takes the form of escape into the imagination. This is the purely subjective freedom that Malinowski dismisses; but what if imagination has a crucial role in enabling the public ‘liberties’ that he thought were truly important? The processual triad that Vygotsky highlights – given reality, imaginative freedom, reconstruction of reality – seems to offer vital clues for understanding not only the ontology of freedom, but also of liberty and autonomy too.

To illustrate the interpretive difficulties involved, we can take a classic case presented to us by Maurice Leenhardt. In *Do Kamo*, Leenhardt (1979 [1947]) argues that the Canaques of New Caledonia he lived with during the 1900s did not understand human individuality in the way Europeans generally did. In particular, somewhat akin to Marriott’s picture of an Indian type of ‘dividual’ and permeable self (see above), Canaques did not hold that selfhood implied the continuous and exclusive cohabitation of a mind with a body through time. To begin with, for them, their concepts did not correspond with how Westerners

might map the actions of a human body in time. For example, Leenhardt informs us that when they told stories about themselves, rather than recalling spatio-temporally distant events back to their mind-body in the present moment, Canaque story-tellers would send their soul or ego out to the places where that event is located with their listeners as company. No problem of hysteresis or time-dependence for Canaques, then, though there is the danger of getting lost (ibid.: 84-85). Clearly Canaques understood the capacities of the self in an utterly different way to, say, Augustine for whom the human ego is thrown contingently into, and must reconstitute itself from, the passage of time (which is why the universality of ‘free will’ is so crucial a reference point). However, this does not mean, in contrast, that Canaques had no ideas about freedom.

For all the complexity of Canaque concepts of human capacity, they seem to have held quite familiar ideas about the relationship between the ego who imagines a place for itself in the world versus the ‘me’ that is constrained by its own bodily presence for others. This becomes clearer when Leenhardt describes Canaque ideas about suicide:

For them suicide is a method of passing from the state of living to the state of *bao* – a state of invisibility and release from the body, where, *liberated from the laws of this world*, they can increase their strength tenfold and at the same time regain their dignity by satisfying their need for vengeance (Leenhardt 1979 [1947]: 39, emphasis added).

What Leenhardt is indexing with the word ‘body’ in this sentence is a little unclear, because he has been

explicit otherwise that Canaques do not have a unified understanding of the body. However, the general sense is plain; freedom most closely corresponds to removal of material-bodily constraints in order to give vent to certain kinds of desires of the soul-ego; suicide is specifically a liberation and way of achieving revenge. This is surely freedom as the ability to 'do what I want', albeit played out in an unfamiliar cosmological frame. Leenhardt goes on to point out that highly dramatized suicides are widely documented in Melanesian ethnography, but they did not represent a death wish as a Western reader might have it, because, again, Canaques did not understand death to mean an irretrievable end of life, more a personal change. In this Canaque drama, the soul is pitted against the material constraints of its embodied presence in the world and the value this has for others. Suicide is an escape by the imagining ego from its current material presentation: it involves a loss of bodily presence, but importantly also a renunciation of accountability to others. There are important clues here, it would seem, to what might be a primary type of imagined freedom.

In turn the case may call to mind a statement of Socrates in the *Gorgias*, which similarly concerns the freedom or independence of the ego from the categories imposed by society at large:

It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus that I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me (Socrates in Arendt 1978: 181).

In other words, a person's public status is of little importance compared to the contradictions that appear in one's understanding of oneself: the difference cannot be resolved simply by doing what is publicly demanded. Hence, whatever liberties or constraints present themselves in the public arena, there is still the freedom of the mind to think otherwise and for itself. When Socrates talks of 'being one' he is, Arendt (1978) argues, contrasting this imaginative awareness of unity against the 'chorus' of multiplying relationships the self finds itself caught up in. Only by escaping back into conscious reflection can the self reconstruct the given structure of its field of action as something meaningful for its own life. Socrates is, then, demanding a special kind of freedom or autonomy for thought itself.

This kind of capacity for escape into reflective awareness – and concomitantly the freedom that consciousness feels vis-à-vis its existence for others in a publicly shared reality – seems to provide at least one fundamental analogy for freedom and autonomy in general. Georges Devereux, the psychoanalyst and anthropologist, indexes a strong corollary for this when he talks of 'the trauma of the unresponsiveness of matter' (1967: 32-34). He gives the example of Hopi mourners slapping the dead and accusing them of having died on purpose to grieve their survivors. The soul is here understood as having maliciously used its subjective freedom or autonomy to leave the world where it should be accountable to those around it. The logic is not only close to that presented by the egoistic suicide of the Canaques, or Kapauku ideas about the mutual autonomy of soul and body, it reiterates the fundamental issue that consciousness is aware of a kind of freedom in its own thoughts, desires et cetera that is

in contrast to the relative unresponsiveness it encounters as a bodily presence in the material world. The words of a young American to Fred Alford point once more to this fissure:

‘My cubicle at work is like a jail cell. My boss is a tyrant. But in a way it doesn’t matter. I can think what I want about him, about work, about anything. In my mind I’m free’.

Do you ever wish you were a little less free in your mind, and a little freer at work? I asked.

‘I never thought of it that way’, replied Sandra. ‘One doesn’t really have much to do with the other, does it?’ (Alford 2005: 14).

Recognising this kind of subjective freedom certainly does not contradict Malinowski’s view that liberties are more than mere thought-stuff; for freedom to correspond to something actual we must have freedoms, or lack them, in our lives in the world, not merely in our ruminations or imaginings. However, perhaps Vygotsky provides us with the factor that links the two sides of the ontological-semantic impasse. Sure enough, the ruminative freedom of the Canaque, or of cubicle worker Sandra, to escape out of their material circumstances into the unconstrained life of the soul or ego is a recognizable, if a one-sided, freedom; but what of the freedom the child experiences as it plays, who steps out of the ‘given structure of the field’ in order to reorder, and then *re-enter*, that field? In this case the freedom has both a reflective escapist side and an intentional active one – freedom here presents itself not only in the act of reimagining the perceptual field, but also as an effect in the world, an ontological change to the world.

And this is not just a useful description of the role of freedom in childhood play-learning but also of the effects of imagination-led action in general: there can exist a productive relationship between imagined freedoms and practicably attainable liberties.

Towards an ontological understanding of freedom

Regarding the very pragmatic puzzles that ethnographic research into freedom presents, an ontological approach can prove helpful. Awareness of the existence of freedom seems often to start from the presence of a signifier of freedom in the concrete research context, extending from there into the various meanings that freedom acquires in daily use. Since freedom appears in so many configurations, our approach to the variable philosophies and metaphysics of freedom must be both anti-foundational and pragmatic in William James’ sense (1975). Freedom, autonomy and liberty can participate in many and radically diverse projects of ‘world-making’ (Goodman 1978)

The historical focus of anthropology on the importance and precedence of symbolic and linguistic meaning has left discussions over the ontological dimensions of the ethnographic enterprise underexplored when it comes to freedom. Ethnography, as an empirical way of knowing, could be (and has recently become) much more attuned to ontological concerns. This offers a partial response to the problems that Derrida (1997) and others have identified with ‘the metaphysics of the logos’. Derrida argues that in a logocentric metaphysics ‘The word is ... already a

constituted unity'. In a logocentric framing the thing signified is welded into an 'apparently innocent proposition' in this way becoming available for metaphysical reflection (ibid.: 93). However, we need to resist this seemingly unavoidable unity of word and thing because when our metaphysics becomes 'logocentric' other concurrent plural qualities and imaginative connotations of freedom hide themselves. Indeed, as Derrida indicates, conflation of word and thing is likely to be far from 'innocent'; it may make it impossible to speak certain freedoms at all. Beyond words there is the bodily-imaginative practice of life: hence our emphasis in the title of our recent volume on 'freedom in practice' (Lino e Silva and Wardle 2016).

What, then, finally, is the relationship between the word '*liberada*' (as in '*travesti liberada*') and 'liberty' or 'freedom', or '*waygreru*' and '*slave*' as experiences of life? An important aim in any exploration of freedom from an anthropological perspective should be to understand what people with whom we share our enterprise, think and how they live freedom themselves. In order to reach an understanding of how freedom is experienced by an 'other' (beyond oneself), an ontological discussion about the basis for our understanding is surely desirable. Quoting Quine (1981: 2): 'Little can be done in the way of tracking thought processes except when we can put words to them. For something objective that we can get our teeth into we must go after the words'. In this sense, words, and language in general, can be used as a means both to frame and to enter a variety of dimensions regarding the existence of freedom – beyond meaning. We may find that 'freedom' as logos is indexing precisely the authorizing 'rule' that freedom as free-play is intent on bending, extending,

reshaping – or breaking. The terminology used – 'liberty', 'freedom', 'autonomy' may, indeed, be being deployed to hide some other or further unvoiced proximal claim about, or potential for, being human.

Regarding the apparent vagueness of a definition of freedom on ontological grounds, we argue that all specific individuatives tend to be vague. This seems to be a characteristic of words in general. For example, terms such as 'dog' or 'desk' are also very vague. Many different objects and qualities of objects go under the name 'desk'. As Quine (1981: 13) reminds us, 'this is vagueness only of classification and not of existence'. The fact that the most varied different physical objects count as 'desks' is not a problem for the existence of desks. Equally, the fact that the most varied actions, concepts, and life events could come to be counted as instances of freedom, is not in itself a problem. Quite the contrary, this could be a remedy to some of the unwanted consequences that follow from restrictive semantic definitions of freedom, alongside the overbearing power that certain meanings of freedom tend to assume at the expense of others. Quine (1981) has famously argued that no translation can absolutely determine meaning, and that no metaphysical theory can exclusively determine existence. The ontological definition of freedom proposed here extends the hope that freedom may come to exist under a variety of understandings, that it can assume a wide variety of meanings, even various, conflicting and contradictory ones. From here we may gain access to the further 'possible freedoms' that Foucault refers to. Such a radical understanding of the complexities of freedom as lived experience can only be achieved when freedom has been liberated from the precedence of meaning itself.

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Notes

- 1 This article is based on our introduction to the volume Lino e Silva, Moises and Huon Wardle (eds.). 2016. *Freedom in Practice: Governance, Autonomy and Liberty in the Everyday*. London: Routledge.
- 2 'I've Won a Day in Court for Two Chimps' New Scientist May 11, 2015.

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