A note to the reader

I am sorry for the lengthiness of this text. The reason for this is simply that what I present here is a draft of the theory chapter in my dissertation. The over-all aim for the dissertation is to answer the question of what individualism consists of, what different kinds of it that exist and how they affect citizen’s civic virtues (tolerance and political participation) at the individual level. What you will read, however, is a conceptual discussion regarding how to define individualism.

I have chosen not to cut down the text here drastically, even though it consists of three sections which each address a slightly different problem (first: the definition of individualism, second: the definition of freedom and third: the definition of moral autonomy). The main idea, however, is that all three discussions are necessary in order to take on my primary task in this chapter: developing the analytical framework I present at p.22. This framework for categorizing individualistic ideals will be used in order to disentangle the empirical material I shall present in later chapters.

The reader who feels pressed for time is of course free to skip or just quickly skim the second part, in which I discuss the well-known problem of defining freedom and settle on the rather straightforward definition Gerald MacCallum once offered (especially pages 13-21). The discussion will hopefully revolve mostly around the first (p.3-13) or third part (p.22-30). Also note there is a summary at p.30.
Chapter 1. Individualism in Theory

Or the Virtues of Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, Lisa Simpson and Pippi Longstocking

Introduction

It is often suggested that the distinguishing characteristic of public opinion in contemporary Western societies is a lack of shared moral guidelines in life: everything goes. The only ideal left is what is often called individualism, namely that of not accepting any given roles, values or ideals in life but instead striving towards being as free as possible to behave as one pleases.\(^1\)

In the thesis that this chapter forms a part of, I shall offer a different understanding of the much discussed culture of individualism. In later chapters, I shall present data that allow us to question existing assumptions regarding the empirical nature of individualistic values. In this chapter, however, I shall begin by addressing what I believe is still an un-settled issue of just as much, if not even more, importance: the concept of individualism and how to define it.

This chapter aims to equip us with the theoretical Wellingtons we need before venturing into the empirical swamp of individualism. We still know too little about individualism as a set of moral ideals concerning how human beings and society ought to behave. The root of the problem, I suggest, is that we lack a theoretically sound definition of what this kind of normative individualism is and what it is not; which in turn means we have no existing framework for making systematic comparisons between different versions of individualistic ideals. The task I intend to undertake here is to develop a definition of normative individualism and such a framework. In doing so, I will not only contribute to a more thorough understanding of individualism, but also to two closely related debates in political theory. Individualism, it will be shown, provides a new and rewarding entry to two classic conceptual questions: how to define freedom and how to define moral autonomy.\(^2\)

Consequently, the following chapter has been divided into three parts. First, I address previous conceptualizations of individualism and suggest a definition that transcends the difficulties they encounter. This is done under the heading 1.1 Previous conceptualizations of Individualism. Secondly, I

\(^1\) For a longer account, see the discussion on p.5-6.
\(^2\) Note that I shall be using ‘freedom’, ‘independence’ and ‘liberty’ synonymously throughout this thesis. For a more thorough discussion of what freedom is, see 1.2 Defining Freedom.
discuss the long debated topic of how to conceptualize freedom and show how Gerald MacCallum’s triadic concept of freedom can be defended and developed. This section is called 1.2 Defining Freedom. Thirdly, in 1.3 Four ideals of individualism, I turn to the specific conceptions of individualism implied by the framework that results from the previous discussions. In doing so, I also forward a new way of capturing the complex and often elusive ideal of moral autonomy. I believe my account of moral autonomy has advantages to previous ones both in clarity and precision, since it presents a rather uncomplicated way of recognizing not only what autonomy is, but also what it is not.

What characterizes a good definition?

Before I begin my investigation of the concept of individualism, I believe it is wise to outline from which position I shall argue that a certain definition is better than another. Unfortunately, there exists no generally agreed upon list of golden rules in order to distinguish a good definition from a bad one. Even if we agree, as I think we should, that we must try to achieve what Felix Oppenheim calls “effective scientific communication”, how to apply this principle remains a controversial undertaking, much like “appraising a particular wine or manuscript”.³

Yet, I believe it is possible to describe the process of achieving “effective scientific communication” in a more specific manner. Most theorists seem to agree that the art of defining things is not an entirely arbitrary business. A good definition, they suggest, must meet the following criteria of evaluation:

(1) Fruitfulness: a good definition should not simply report ordinary language but it must also add something to our existing understanding. It should, as Oppenheim says, “reveal the structure of political concepts”, which allows us to compare situations that we may not have realized earlier are actually comparable.

(2) Simplicity: a good definition should not depart unnecessarily from how the term is normally used, it should ‘clarify’ rather than ‘replace’ ordinary language.

(3) Open-endedness: a good definition should not be too narrow in the sense that it should not include too much of that which we might want to empirically investigate (for example, it is better to define freedom as one thing and happiness as another, instead of defining freedom as something that always leads to happiness)⁴

⁴ Naturally, I am not saying that a definition could ever tell us what is true empirically; however, it can make it difficult to examine the reality by including too much into the definition. Assume one person defines freedom as $x$ (a certain relationship) and the other as $x+y$ (as a relationship $x$ that always, per definition, lead to happiness $y$). Both persons would be able to empirically explore whether $x$ lead to $y$; their definitions could of
(4) Precision: a good definition should avoid vagueness by only being applicable to one specific idea and not to several ones although these may often be expressed by the same term.5

Although I realize these criteria may of course be further developed and in their turn assessed (however, one might ask: in relation to what?), I shall leave that work to others. Suffice it to say that these are the criteria that will guide my discussion in this chapter.

1.1 Previous conceptualizations of individualism

One of the first social scientists to discuss the phenomenon of individualism in public opinion was the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville. In his second book on Democracy in America (first published in 1840), he argues that individualism manifests itself in that most Americans citizens

"feel no longer bound to their fate by a common interest; each of them, standing aloof, thinks that he is reduced to care for himself alone"6

He further notes that whereas selfishness “originates in blind instinct”, individualism is more of “a mature and calm feeling” that originates in the mind just as much as in the heart. Finally, he also points out a worrying paradox: although individualism is essentially “of democratic origin”, it also forms the greatest threat to democracy, since it leads people to identify less and less with other people and society at large:

“…individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness”7

In French, the term individualisme, as opposed to the English individualism, has always been laden with negative associations.8 Thus, considering course never make such a relationship empirically true. However, for the second person, it would be much trickier to investigate whether x lead to y, since he would have to invent a new terminology for describing two different components of what he called freedom in order to explore their internal relationship. I am indebted to Mats Lundström for discussing this issue with me.


6 Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), 208.

7 Ibid., 205.

the French origins of the sociological tradition, it is not very surprising that sociologically oriented scholars have often assumed individualism to be if not threatening then at least deeply troublesome.\(^9\) Consider for example one of the most influential recent works on individualism, completed by a cross-disciplinary team under the title *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (first published in 1985). The authors believe that the distinguishing trait of contemporary American individualism is

> "its readiness to treat normative commitments as so many alternative strategies of self-fulfillment. What has dropped out are the normative expectations on what makes life worth living."\(^{10}\)

Another example of this negative outlook on individualism is given in Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*. Under the heading “The Apotheosis of Individualism”, Lasch asserts that contemporary individualism consists of a “present-oriented hedonism”, a “cult of consumption with its immediate gratifications” and “a search for pleasure and psychic survival”:

> "The pursuit of self-interest, formerly identified with the rational pursuit of gain and accumulation of wealth, has become a search for pleasure and psychic survival".\(^{11}\)

In fact, I believe it can be said that de Tocqueville’s alarm for the future of democracy in individualistic societies has come to dominate a considerable amount of the studies on individualism; not only in sociology and political science, but also in anthropology, psychology and philosophy. On most accounts, just as we saw here above, individualism is equated to amorality and selfishness, or the idea that such behavior is somehow justifiable. Individualism is taken to mean, or be inherently linked to, materialism, hedonism and even alienation; since individualists are defined as people who believe that they have no duties towards others, scholars expect their understanding of the meaning in life to consist of little more than striving towards...

\(^9\) When I say ‘assumed’, it is because I am not questioning that the phenomenon many sociologists call individualism may indeed lead to troubling consequences. Instead, what I criticize is the way they have conceptualized individualism to begin with.

\(^{10}\) At times, the authors also use a wider and more positive definition of individualism as a belief in the inherent dignity of human beings Robert N Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (London: California University Press, 1996), 334. However, this definition is, I believe, too broad to be useful for empirical categorization. Indeed, although the authors claim they use it, they do not in fact try to capture this broader and more positively loaded individualism empirically, but tend to study individualism as a synonyme to privatism and ego-centrism after all, Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 334. This interpretation is supported by George Kateb, "Democratic Individualism and Its Critics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003): 301.

one’s own self-fulfillment. Furthermore, since individualists lack a greater goal than their own self-fulfillment, it is sometimes even suggested that in the long run, their refusal to compromise this goal and their disinterest in “normative commitments” results in psychological malaise, depression and, some scholars have suggested, even in growing tensions within society -- and on the most radical version a risk of full-blown anarchy.

In psychological research, there is a slightly different way of conceptualizing individualism. Here, individualism is often measured by asking people to agree or disagree with statements such as “I rely on myself most of the time; I rarely rely on others” or “When another person does better than I do, I get tense and aroused”. Indeed, in a recent meta-analysis of individualism and collectivism, the authors contend that “the core element of individualism is the assumption that individuals are independent of one another”. The key word here is ‘assumption’. When it is not an assumption, psychologists tend to view and study individualism either as a “worldview”, a certain kind of “self-concept”, a certain definition of “well-being”, a specific “attribution style” or a type of “relationality”. Thus, psychological studies often focus on individualism as something descriptive rather than normative, people are individualists because they act or feel in certain ways, not because they think that this or that is right or valuable.

---


There are of course some exceptions. However, these tend to suffer from an interesting incongruence: they equate individualism both with hedonism (as we saw here above when discussing for example *Habits of the Heart*) and with achievement-values. Thus, we see individualism measured both by asking people to rate the importance of industriousness and hard work, but also on answering how much they value pleasure, excitement and variation in life.\(^{15}\) However, at least in theory, we tend to think of determination and perseverance as the very opposites of relaxed pursuit of pleasure. Thus, at the very least, we need to explain how it can be that individualism consists of both these things at the same time and whether or not they are in fact interrelated. We need to know what it is that makes individualistic ideals individualistic in the first place, in order to assess whether both the entrepreneurial spirit, the so-called American myth of rugged individualism on the one hand, and the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification on the other hand can be called ideals of individualism.

Let me summarize this brief overview of existing research on individualism in the following points. I argue that in the social sciences:

- The most common view of individualism is to equate it with the pursuit of self-interest, so individualism means mainly letting egoism take overhand over altruism
- Also, individualism is equated to alienation, i.e. having no larger goals in life than one’s own self-fulfillment
- Moreover, individualism is most often studied as a behavior, assumption or attribution styles
- Finally, when individualism is assumed to be something normative, it is assumed to be the same as either hedonism or achievement-values, or both

The up-shot of this is that an important part of individualism has been neglected: the ideals of individualism. In the following section, I shall try to spell out this argument more clearly.

What happened to normative individualism?

In the less empirical and more philosophical tradition, it is generally recognized that individualism is used both for ideas that specify “a value or ideal” and ideas that specify “a way of conceiving the individual”, as Steven Lukes puts it. The ideals and values he regards as individualistic are, however, neither hedonism nor achievement-values. These values, I shall argue in a couple of pages, may be related to individualism but should not be defined as the same thing as individualism. Individualistic ideals, I shall argue in what follows, all share a common core that goes beyond hedonism and achievement-values.

Instead of hedonism or achievement-values, Lukes mentions autonomy, privacy, and self-development as examples of normative individualism. All are substantial individualistic ideals regarding how one ought to live, what one ought to strive for. These values are, quite simply, what political philosophers would call ‘conceptions of the good’.

In a similar vein to Lukes, George Kateb states that individualism is both “a normative doctrine and a set of practices people engage in”:

“As a doctrine, it is not meant as a rationalization for self-assertion of the person who propounds it. It is meant for all people or, in its antidemocratic variant, for only certain sorts of people who may be few in number.”

It now becomes clear what exactly previous research has done wrong. First of all, it has only addressed individualism as “a set of practices”, seemingly unaware of the fact that they hereby neglect the values of individualism. Yet, there is considerable consensus that values are different from predispositions. People’s idea of what is right and desirable differs from what they experience as facts, just as it differs from what they actually do.

---

16 Lukes, Individualism, 73. Others who discuss different ideas that are often called individualism are Douglas Buer et al., "What Values Do People Prefer in Children? A Comparative Analysis of Survey Evidence from Fifteen Countries," in The Psychology of Values: The Ontario Symposium, ed. Clive Seligman, James M. Olson, and Mark P. Zanna (1996), 302., who argue that individualism is not to be equated with narcissism, egotism and selfishness. On their view, these are components of individualism, which also includes other, normative components. This is also the conclusion in Oscarsson, “Om Individualisering.”, 2005.


19 Naturally, the boundaries between ideology and predispositions or cultural frames are sometimes blurred, and this is not the place to reach a clear-cut dichotomy between the two. But I believe that the issue of how much a person values independence can still be separated both from how much independence he believes to have in his own existence or whether he actually lives up to his own ideals of striving for independence. Gian Vittorio Caprara et al., "Personality and Politics; Values, Traits, and Political Choice," Political Psychology 27, no.
Secondly, given that the neglected side of individualism can be seen as a normative doctrine in itself, it seems particularly unfortunate that so many previous studies have defined the set of practices they call individualistic as the very opposite of values, morality, self-discipline and principles. By doing so, they have cut off fruitful potential exchanges with the discussions on individualism in ethics and political theory, which is where ideals such as autonomy and self-reliance are most often discussed.

Thirdly, by relating individualism so close to the feeling of meaninglessness and the spread of moral relativism (in one word alienation), previous research also fails to address what individualism is taken to mean in its empirical ‘home’: the United States. After all, de Tocqueville coined the term when describing what he saw as a specifically American character trait and ever since then individualism has been considered “the most fundamental of American values”. However, although they are supposedly the most individualistic people in the world, numerous reports show that Americans have very clear opinions on what is right and what is not and are not at all sceptical towards the existence of universal moral values and a meaning in life. They value individual freedom, but not necessarily the freedom to do whatever one likes, nor the freedom from universal moral principles. Rather, they seem to value freedom in specific substantial forms, such as self-expression or the famous self-reliance. People are often proud to be individualists. Indeed, as Yehoshua Arieli stresses in his Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology, individualism in the United States is far from descriptive, it is normative – something good. It seems to me that since existing conceptualizations of individualism cannot incorporate this widespread use of the word, they fail the simplicity criterion, i.e. that of not departing unnecessarily from normal language.

Given all this, I believe it is unfortunate to start by claiming that normative individualism is confined to

a) the ideal of living for one’s own short-term pleasure, of having an exciting and varying life (hedonism)

and/or

b) the ideal of striving for personal success (achievement values related to materialism).

---

The fact that someone may reject externally imposed moral ideals does not necessarily mean they reject universal moral ideals as such and only live for the sake of pleasure. Assuming only this combination can be called individualistic constitutes a much too narrow definition of individualistic ideals. Contrary to what many psychological studies of individualism presuppose, self-discipline may not always be related to collectivism but also exist in an individualist version, as something an individual perceives as self-imposed (I need to discipline myself for my own sake, in order to cultivate my true/real/best self).

Likewise, a person may not value achievement or material success at all and still value individual self-actualization. Should we not call that person an individualist?

I believe these quite possible combinations need to be examined, not just assumed to be true. In later chapters, I will do this empirically. However, here my argument is simply theoretical: we need a more open-ended definition of normative individualism than the predominate one once inspired by de Tocqueville, according to which if individualism is an ideal at all, it is only the ideal of pursuing one’s own self-interest either in hedonistic or achievement-oriented terms.

A definition of normative individualism

Strangely enough, not even among the theorists who have studied the concept of individualism have I found a proper discussion of what it is that makes certain doctrines individualistic, as opposed to something else. Yet, we do not want to be comparing apples and oranges. Therefore, it is important to find their common core.

Autonomy, privacy and self-development, that are all three forms of individualism,

“can be seen, so to speak, as the ‘three faces of freedom’ — by which I mean that, while distinct from one another, all three are basic to the idea of freedom and that freedom is incomplete when any one of them is absent or diminished”

Lukes claims. Also, he continues:

“liberty is an amalgam of personal autonomy, lack of public interference and the power of self-development”

---

23 Ibid., p.131.
Although I believe Lukes starts in the wrong end by first deciding (based on what?) which sub-categories of liberty there are and then deciding the category (liberty) to which they all belong, I do believe he is on to something here.

Individualism as a normative doctrine, it seems to me, is the same as an ideal of individual freedom, i.e. the belief that individual freedom of some kind is inherently valuable. This is the definition I shall use from now one. Any ideal that stresses the value of individual freedom, liberty or independence (which I shall here use synonymously), is therefore an individualistic ideal.

My definition of individualism resonates with recent conclusions from meta-analyses of psychological research on individualism, which have argued that “the most salient feature of individualism, as defined by the majority of studies, was valuing personal independence”. However, there are also considerable differences from those previous definitions discussed earlier.

Contrary to what most previous analysts of individualism have done, I do not delimit the phenomenon to a specific commitment to the freedom to do whatever one wants, or to freedom from duties or universally binding moral values. Instead, the concept I offer includes any commitment to individual freedom, whether it consists of valuing duty over pleasure or vice-versa. By doing so, I get a tool for recognizing the individualistic aspect of what contemporary social scientists have called anti-authoritarian, emancipatory or libertarian values. To the extent these trends reflect normative commitments to the value of individual freedom of for example developing one’s authentic talents, or of committing entirely to a certain ascetic ideal that one believes in, I believe it is correct to say they are all essentially individualistic trends.

Also, by defining the core of individualism as adherence to an ideal of individual freedom, I exclude egoism, alienation, alienation, general hedonism and achievement values from what individualism is. This does not of course imply that they could not be empirically related. On the contrary, this is pre-

---

24 This is not to deny that individualism cannot be correctly used for other phenomena outside the scope of public opinion, such as for example methodological or religious individualism.


26 In fact, there are indications in existing surveys of the existence of this normative doctrine of individualism that I am out to capture. The problem has been that, due to the lack of conceptual and theoretical clarity I have stressed here above, these values have remained entangled with more abstract, descriptive and even behavior-oriented attitudes that these surveys measure simultaneously. Zygmunt Bauman, "Foreword: Individually, Together," in Individualization, ed. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (London: Sage Publications, 2002); Flanagan and Lee, "The New Politics, Culture Wars, and the Authoritarian-Libertarian Value Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies."; Richard L Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Inglehart and Welzel, Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy, the Human Development Sequence; Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations; Milton Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1960).
cisely what I want to find out; but I can only examine this if I define individualism as analytically distinct from these other issues.

Yet, it is not enough to simply say that someone values individual liberty. It seems we need to elaborate on the definition of individualism as the belief that individual freedom is inherently valuable. In reality, there are many different such beliefs; people’s ideals of freedom can take on almost any number of forms. In order to see what makes them different and yet alike, we need to trace the boundaries of what we mean by an ideal of individual freedom. What allows us to say that it is freedom that someone values, as opposed to something else?

1.2 Defining freedom

Bernard Williams has argued that the task of defining the concept of liberty, often very popular among political theorists, is a rather pointless undertaking. Instead, he suggests, more concern should be directed at how to understand freedom “as a value for us in the world”.27 This is exactly what I will do in what follows.

What Williams means is that we should not regard disagreements on freedom as semantic conflicts that are to be solved by arguing that only one of all the existing definitions of freedom is correct and all the others are mistaken. Instead, we should see them as disagreement on one and the same thing. As Williams puts it, “there must be a core, or perhaps a primitive conception, to which these various conceptions relate”.28

I suggest we should define this common core in the triadic terms Gerald MacCallum once suggested. For MacCallum, the defining characteristic of freedom is that it concerns (1) someone’s freedom (2) from something (3) in doing something. He allows us to say that disagreements on freedom do not lie in that different parties speak of different concepts altogether, but in that they ‘fill out’ the same concept differently and stress different values on one or more of the three ‘variables’. In other words, different conceptions of freedom can all be gathered under the same triadic concept of freedom.29

Following MacCallum, then, I shall define ideals of freedom as all, and only those, beliefs that deal with the ‘triadic’ relation between an agent, an obstacle and an area of activity. Whenever someone speaks of someone being

---

free to do something from someone, it is indeed someone’s freedom they are speaking of. But we still need to specify what kind of agent (whose freedom?), constraint (freedom from what?) and area (freedom to do what?) they have in mind.30

The primary advantage of using MacCallum’s definition lies in its fruitfulness, which I believe does not, as in many other cases, come at the cost of a loss in simplicity. His definition does seem to “reveal a structure” that we might guess is there but that only becomes lucid when we look at people’s beliefs through the lenses his definition provides us with. The most obvious drawback with MacCallum’s definition, on the other hand, is its lack of precision. Since he does not specify who may count as an agent, what might count as a constraint and what might be an area of freedom, it becomes possible to include very many relations under his concept of freedom. If my purpose here would be another than it is, this might present me with a pertinent problem. Yet, in the current circumstances, I do not think the most crucial requirement is that of precision but rather that of open-endedness. As I have already discussed, my purpose is not primarily to choose a definition that allows us to exclude what is not freedom from what is. Rather, my aim is to find an as broad and yet meaningful definition of individual freedom as possible, one that we can be assured includes all relevant ideals of individual freedom in the discussion, without of course losing track of the shared characteristics of them altogether.

Why freedom is always freedom to

There have been two lines of critique against MacCallum that both stress what I believe can be phrased as his purported lack of open-endedness. These critics argue that MacCallum’s concept is unsatisfactory because it can not include what it should, since he demands that we always have an idea of both the constraints to and areas of freedom when in reality, they argue, we often only have one of these things in mind.

On the one hand we have the proponents of freedom as freedom from constraints and nothing else. John Gray has suggested that, contrary to what MacCallum allows us to assume, we often simply want more freedom in general and not to engage in a specific activity. Freedom, Gray argues, is thus only freedom from something -- not simultaneously freedom to do something as MacCallum assumes. Note that since any imaginable activity can count as a relevant area of freedom for MacCallum, Gray’s objection is

30 In this sense, freedom is, just as Bernard Williams claims, always something more than simply a capacity, it is a capacity that is not interfered with Williams, "From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value," 7.
not that there are certain specific areas of freedom that MacCallum’s definition does not include.\textsuperscript{31} Instead, what Gray claims is that we should see freedom itself as something that does not include an area \textit{at all}.\textsuperscript{32}

But if freedom is not a certain relation to some particular activity, as MacCallum assumes, then what is it? On Gray’s account, freedom rather denotes a thing in itself, regardless of whether or not one does something with it. Rather, it is a metaphysical \textit{entity}, a thing one \textit{has} rather than a state one can \textit{be} in.

It is precisely because of his reduction of freedom to a thing that can never be defined in other terms than freedom that I doubt the plausibility of Gray’s position. As soon as we apply his view of freedom to daily life, we realize we can never know what this entity he calls freedom actually is. I sincerely doubt it makes sense to say that freedom of opinion can exist regardless of whether or not people are actually free to have opinions. Likewise, it seems odd to say that freedom of religion does not consist in being free to practice religion but in having freedom from religious oppression. Yet, this is exactly what Gray’s dyadic view of freedom entails.

But if this thing that one has is not the freedom to do something, then what is it? I believe it is best to assume that freedom always involves a purpose, an area in which one wants to be free to do something, an activity one thinks is meaningful quite apart from whether or not one is free to do it or not. This does not of course mean one cannot be free to do things one does not want to do. All that MacCallum’s definition demands from us is that we assume some kind of minimal rationality: people want freedom because it is a form of relation they want to have to some activity they find meaningful. Note that a meaningful activity does not need to be a desirable activity. Thus, there is nothing to prevent us from saying for example that a person values his freedom from someone to cut off his ears, or to starve himself to death – activities which he might at the moment find undesirable and yet want to be free to undertake, were he to find them desirable in the future.

Contrary to Gray, I see no reason why we couldn’t always ask ourselves what it is that we want to be free to do. Since MacCallum does not restrict the area variable in any way, but leaves it open so as to include “doing, not doing, becoming, or not becoming” anything, any answer to this question will do. The only answer that will not do is Gray’s, as I see it, untenable claim: “When I say I want freedom, I just mean I want to have something that consists in being un-constrained by someone or something, without

\textsuperscript{31} MacCallum deliberately leaves his definition of it open, so that one can be free in “doing, not doing, becoming, or not becoming something”. It is therefore quite possible to use MacCallum’s concept in order to say that one can be free to do absolutely anything, MacCallum, "\textit{Negative and Positive Freedom}," 314.

thinking of any particular activities I want to pursue with this something I have”. 33

Why self-direction is a conception of freedom

Secondly, there are those who, contrary to Gray, claim that freedom is most often only freedom to, namely freedom to do something without having any particular constraints in mind. Benn and Weinstein for example claim that MacCallum’s insistence on the constraint variable forces him to exclude one of the most relevant versions of liberty, namely that of self-direction. The reason for this, they hold, is that self-direction is not mainly concerned with the absence of constraints but rather with the presence of a certain ability: an ability to choose, to make up your own mind about things. 34

Since self-direction, or autonomy as it is often called, seems to be such a crucial version of individualism, I do believe it would be a major drawback to end up with a concept of freedom that did not allow us to incorporate the ideal of self-direction. However, as I shall show now, this critique can in fact be met while keeping MacCallum’s definition of freedom intact.

Imagine a scenario much like that described in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. In this society, children are produced in laboratories and brought up in breeding factories. The main purpose of these factories is to categorize different kinds of people into different work tasks and social classes, and at the same time keep them as happy as possible with the tasks and class they are designated for. Infants are indoctrinated from the very beginning to believe that their social class is best for them and will make them the happiest. For example, a child who is brought up to do physical labor and practical jobs is trained to dislike imagination and free thought by the emission of electric shocks as soon as he reaches for a book.

Now imagine that the regime under which all this takes place is suddenly overthrown in favor of a radically different society, in which the new authorities actually encourage people to choose for themselves and to cultivate the interests that they themselves appreciated without the ‘help’ of electric shocks. All of a sudden, the people who had been brought up in conditioning factories would now find themselves immersed in a radically free society. However, most probably they would still be unable to want anything else than what they were once conditioned to want, no matter how many alternative life styles their new society could now offer them. If this were the case, many of us would agree that these persons still lacked an inherently valuable...

---

33 Feinberg provides us with yet a second counter-argument against Gray: it is indeed hard to avoid giving information on an area of freedom, since as soon as we define which constraints have been removed, it usually also follows an understanding of what activity that they previously constrained but no longer do, Feinberg, *Social Philosophy*, 10-11.

freedom, namely that of self-direction. Yet, if we relied on MacCallum’s concept, his critics argue, we would be forced to conclude that these conditioned people were actually free, since they now lived in a free society where they in fact had all the possibilities in the world to do whatever they wanted. For, as we know, MacCallum claims that un-freedom demands the existence of constraints; and the persons in our example do not seem to be facing any constraints at all once the ruling regime has changed. So it seems we must agree that if we think of freedom as MacCallum suggests, self-direction cannot be called a conception of freedom but of something else.35

I believe this is an erroneous conclusion, based on the mistaken assumption that constraints must be of a particular kind. It is true that many liberal versions of freedom (including that of Bernard Williams) have delimited the constraint variable so that only intentional obstructions originating from other people can count as constraints that create un-freedom. As I see it, however, this claim stems from a certain conception of freedom; and if we want to uphold the distinction between MacCallum’s concept and different conceptions it may include, we had better steer clear of excluding non-intentional or non-human constraints per definition. In fact, MacCallum also realizes this and therefore defines constraints so that they may include all kinds of “restrictions, interference, and barriers”.36 This definition seems to be able to include all possible limitations placed on the persons from our Brave New World, whether we want to say that their self-direction is blocked by their background and their upbringing, or by their presumed ignorance, fear of change or their stubbornness to remain in the patterns they were once taught. And is it not precisely because the advocates of self-direction regard some, or all, of these barriers as constraints that they would claim that the persons in our example were un-free? Would they not agree that it is the very fact that there are still some kind of restrictions on these persons, originating either from others or from themselves, that make it possible to say they are still un-free? Contrary to what these critics claim, then, I do not see why MacCallum’s emphasis on the constraint variable should force us to say that the ideal of self-direction is not about freedom. On the contrary, self-direction proves to be an excellent example of an ideal of freedom with MacCallum’s terminology.

There is also a closely related critique that amounts to the charge that MacCallum cannot incorporate self-direction into his concept because he demands that the *area* in which one is free or un-free must always involve action of some kind.37

---

35 Nota till Christman!
However, I can not find any ground for such a conclusion in MacCallum’s own writings. As I have already noted, he allows for freedom to be exercised in all imaginable areas and says nothing of concrete actions. And, after all, is not self-direction an activity of some kind, although perhaps not necessarily something that one acts out?

Let us consider the Brave New World example again. As I see it, the conditioned people in the example can be said to lack self-direction in two different areas: thought and action. Both of these areas are quite compatible with MacCallum’s intentionally open definition of areas of freedom.

First of all, we may argue that conditioned individuals are un-free since they are not free to realize their true self. For all we know, their calling may be to be violinists or philosophers, but their up-bringing has made it impossible for them to realize this, since all they have been forced to want is to perform repetitive manual tasks. Because of this, we might claim they lack the freedom to develop themselves or to realize their true self. They are un-free to act in a certain way, in line with who they are. In this case, it is their freedom of action that is, or has been, constrained.

There is also a second possible view here, according to which the primary un-freedom of the individuals in the example does not consist in not being able to act in line with their own pre-existing calling or being unable to make the best of themselves, but rather in not having the ability to question what it is that they want in the first place. We might argue that the persons in the example have been brainwashed so that their existing thoughts are not really their own but have been imposed on them by others. On this approach, their un-freedom does not consist so much in not doing something as in being unable to form their own thoughts, to question their own tastes and preferences. In this latter case, what we are saying is that their freedom of thought is, or has been, constrained.

Contrary to what the critics claim, then, I believe MacCallum’s concept can incorporate two forms of self-direction as conceptions of freedom. Whether we want to say that the brainwashed people in our example are un-free in their actions or in their thoughts, MacCallum gives us tools to capture this relationship and speak of it as one of un-freedom.

**Freedom to what?**

The up-shot of the above is that we can separate freedom ideals depending on whether they deal with an agent’s actions or his thoughts. Doing so allows us to speak of the freedom and un-freedom of thinking for oneself without there being anything strange about it.

In this context, I shall take thinking to contain nothing else than its meaning in ordinary language, namely the process of reflecting, creating meaning, evaluating, assessing, questioning, approving and criticizing by the use of a
cognitive faculty of the mind that every human being is assumed to possess (perhaps with the exception of infants and the mentally gravely disabled). In this sense, I assume everyone has the inherent ability to think, but that this ability can be hampered with and that others, or one’s self, can constrain this capacity to think and thereby make a person un-free.

Moreover, I shall assume that thought and action are two mutually exclusive categories. Of course, this is not to say that the two activities are mutually exclusive, indeed, it is very likely that one can be said to think while acting; but the point is that thinking and acting are two conceptually different activities and that one can act without thinking and think without acting. Indeed, as several philosophers have observed, the two may even be in conflict with each other. Hannah Arendt for example sees thinking as the stopping of what one is doing and asking oneself “Why am I doing this?” or “What is the meaning of what we are doing?”38 In the same way, I believe it makes sense to distinguish ideals concerning freedom of action from ideals concerning freedom of thought.

In fact, William Connolly has proposed that we distinguish between two forms of freedom: one that operates on the level of an agent’s “ability to conceive and to choose reflectively among alternatives”, and another that operates on the agent’s “actual and potential actions, limiting his ability to act upon his choices. A stratified educational system, a routinized work or a conservative family structure may constrain a person’s freedom of the former kind without inflicting on their freedom of the latter kind. Lower-class students may be unable to think of pursuing a diplomatic career if never confronted with that possibility, although they might actually have access to a number of grants and other possibilities to realize such a potential will, were they to acquire it. For Connolly, the above discussion boils down to different kinds of constraints that people may want freedom from. However, I believe the heart of the matter is rather that threats may be directed at two rather different aspects or levels of an agent’s choice: either her capacity to think through different alternatives, or her actual possibilities to act upon her final decision, however this was reached.39

Freedom from what?

If we turn to constraints, Joel Feinberg has suggested they can be either internal or external; the latter originating from other agents than the one’s whose liberty is at stake and the former from his or her self. Note that Feinberg uses this distinction in order to categorize the inherent nature of differ-

ent constraints, and I am not convinced that his distinction can fulfill this purpose satisfactorily. For example, if a person internalizes other people’s opinions and is therefore un-free, should we then conclude that he is internally or externally constrained? 40

Nevertheless, my interest here is not to discuss the objective character of constraints. Instead, it is to distinguish from where advocates of different liberty ideals want freedom, i.e. wherefrom advocates of different ideals think that constraints originate. This, I believe, is an easier question to settle, since it does not depend on psychological assessments of the nature of the human mind. All I need to do is find out whether proponents of a certain ideal perceive the main constraints on freedom as coming from outside of the agent himself or not. For example, one camp may believe that traditional gender roles contribute to individual’s un-freedom by placing the external shackles of popular opinion, tradition and older generations on him. Meanwhile, proponents of another view of freedom may very well claim that the problem is one of internal un-freedom: each individual, they might argue, is un-free to think or act outside the scope of traditional gender roles, since he is constrained by his own weakness to conform or his own fear of change.

One might of course object that even if I do not intend to say anything about whether constraints on someone’s freedom can in fact come from within or not, it is still suspicious to assume that certain people would believe this to be the case and have ideals regarding such an internal freedom. Does anyone really imagine obstacles against oneself within oneself? Wouldn’t that seem to express a close to schizophrenic psychology? 41

Nevertheless, I believe this inner dimension of individual independence may in fact be of utmost importance for how we reason in everyday life. Consider for example the common excuse used of someone in rage as “not being themselves” (in many languages, there among Swedish, there is the revealing idiomatic expression “to be outside oneself with anger”). Likewise, we speak of people being consumed by rage, overwhelmed by desire or caught by a whim. All these metaphors express the idea that a person’s real, reasonable self may “give in” to certain feelings. At least our language implies that we often imagine that our true selves may, temporarily at least, capitulate to desires and whims that are not truly our own. But neither do these desires and whims belong to others; in this sense they are perceived of as internal obstacles to our independence.

40 I have here, in line with Feinberg, used the word constraint to denote the variable rather than a specific category that might stand in the way of an agent’s liberty, Feinberg, Social Philosophy, 5. For a discussion of internal and external constraints, see Feinberg, Social Philosophy, 12-13. Also see Jon Elster, Sour Grapes, Studies in the Subversion of Rationality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 126.
An analytical framework

The up-shot of the previous discussion is that ideals of individual freedom are a product of two cross-cutting dimensions: the perceived origin of the constraints and the perceived nature of the area of freedom. I have argued that constraints can be seen as coming either from within the individual’s mind or body (internal), or from outside it (external). I further proposed that areas in which freedom is sought can be judged as two particular kinds: freedom of thought and freedom of action.

I realize all of the categories, such as action and thought etc., are rather broad. Because they are meant to be exhaustive, they can of course not capture all possible distinctions between the ideals of freedom there may be. But such a nuanced picture is not what I aim for.\footnote{For example, I have disregarded Feinberg’s suggested distinction between constraints as either negative or positive, since I believe it is hard to apply them on ideals of liberty. He defines negative constraints as the lack of something (for example the lack of knowledge or of money), and positive constraints as the existence of something (for example the existence of obsessive thoughts or of locked doors). But it seems to me that all defenders of an ideal of liberty are likely to speak of constraints as positively defined, and none as negatively defined. Someone who strives for self-direction would thus say that the housewife is constrained by the existence of certain norms or pressure, rather than that she is constrained by the lack of other norms, knowledge or pressure, Feinberg, Social Philosophy, 13. Tänk mer!} Rather, my framework attempts to strike a balance between two needs: fruitfulness and precision. Its purpose is to capture conceptions of individual independence that have been both historically and philosophically important but without losing track of the main dividing lines between them.

Also note I have simply assumed that agents can be either individual or something else, and that it is only agents who are perceived of as individuals that are interesting to us here. However, what about people who perceive themselves not as individuals but as part of something larger (for example the cosmos) and who want to be free from, say, their own inner constraints in realizing their cosmic self? Do not these people qualify as individualists?

Although I do believe these people might, in some objective sense, be qualified as examples of an individualistic culture, my answer is still in the negative: such people are not individualists in the sense I use the word here, namely in that their belief is not individualistic. Their beliefs may of course spring from some kind of individualistic commitment to begin with. For example, they might have been brought up to believe in the value of thinking for themselves and not following the opinions of the majority, and this might have lead them to embrace their cosmic liberation theory. However, once they take the step from identifying the agent that needs to be liberated not with an individual but with a cosmic spirit, truth or something else, we can not call them individualists anymore, since, strictly speaking, they do no longer subscribe to individual freedom as inherently valuable.
The theoretical framework that results from my discussion can be summarized in the following figure:

Figure 1. An analytical framework for ideals of individualism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraints on ind. freedom</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area of ind. freedom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of thought</td>
<td>Moral autonomy</td>
<td>Anti-conformism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of action</td>
<td>Self-realization</td>
<td>Self-assertion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above figure illustrates my framework and the typology of four ideal type individualisms it results in. In each of the four boxes we find a specific substantial ideal or a conception of individual freedom, which is to be regarded as an ideal type.

1.3 Four ideals of individualism

Note that what I present in the figure above is meant to be a typology of individualisms and not individualists. Thus, theoretically at least, these four dimensions are mutually independent, which means that a person might value all of them or none. I expect any individual to be capable of a stand on each of these four dimensions (at least once they think about the issues), in exactly the same way we expect people to have an opinion on both their pay, their work tasks, their time and their colleagues when we ask them to think of their career. Just as one’s salary and the atmosphere among one’s colleagues are two different issues of concern to a person, so are moral autonomy, self-realization, anti-conformism and self-assertion. Of course, it remains an empirical question whether people’s stand on one of these issues is related to any of the other issues – i.e. if these dimensions are internally related or not. Just as the salaries in a company can in turn be related to the atmosphere among the co-workers, the fact that someone holds a high opinion of moral autonomy may of course be related to their opinion of anti-conformism. But this does not change the theoretical point I make here,
namely that these are different matters, moral autonomy is one thing and anti-conformism another. They are, simply, different ideals of freedom.

In what follows, I shall briefly describe each of these ideals and argue that their internal differences and similarities are of great importance to understanding not only modern culture but also philosophers such as Gerald Dworkin, Jon Elster, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.43

Moral autonomy: the example of Harry Potter

In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, one of the immensely popular children’s books at the turn of the 21st Century, the young wizard Harry accidentally finds an extraordinary mirror, which shows anyone gazing into it what that person most desires. In it, Harry sees his dead parents alive and happy, and quite naturally he is overwhelmed by the happiness this illusion gives him. Headmaster Dumbledore warns Harry not to get lost gazing into the mirror however much he may want it, since “Men have wasted before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what they see is real or even possible”. Harry reluctantly realizes that in order for him to grow up and see things as they are, as opposed to as he wishes they were, he must learn both to master his own awakening urge for power and the sorrow and longing for his dead parents.44

The moral lesson here is not, I believe, that we should ‘get over’ our sorrows or forget about our past. Rather, the point is that we must not let ourselves be driven by these feelings when we think about things; just as Harry should not let himself be driven by the involuntary connection he has to Lord Voldemort, who manipulates his way into his brain and tries tempt him with the allure of power. Instead, we must take command over the feelings we might inevitably feel, control but not forget our inner demons, and use our reason. In this, Harry’s inner struggle symbolizes the ideal in the upper left box: moral autonomy (or internal freedom of thought). A person who commits to this ideal strives towards taking control over his own desires; his goal is to liberate his mind from the inner enemies that might blur his capacity of critical reflection.45

It is often agreed that moral autonomy is some form of self-government or self-direction, but it is seldom specified in what area this activity should

43 The following discussion is incomplete.
take place. Instead, theorists have introduced a complicated terminology for distinguishing between different levels of desires. Gerald Dworkin suggests an autonomous or self-governing person is one who has the capacity to have higher-order desires concerning his lower-order desires. For example, wanting to eat a cake is a lower-order desire, i.e. a desire about a certain action; whereas wanting to abstain from eating cakes is a higher-order desire, i.e. a desire about another desire. For me to be self-governing would thus mean being able to reach the decision to go on a diet and think I should try to resist any cakes that come my way. However, actually being able to resist the temptation of a creamy slice of chocolate cake when it is offered to me is not an instance of my autonomy, since it concerns whether or not I act on my lower-order desire.46

Instead of saying that the ideal of autonomy is that of having the capacity to have higher order desires, I believe Dworkin’s idea can be captured more efficiently by seeing moral autonomy as the ideal of internal individual freedom of thought. After all, what is a ‘capacity to have higher order desires’ other than a person’s ability to reflect on her desires, or simply the ability to think unimpaired by her urges? Autonomy comes down to exercising some kind of control over the processes whereby your own preferences are formed, Elster says.47 And even those thinkers who, contrary to Dworkin and Elster, use the word autonomy not only for forming one’s opinions but also for acting on them, seem to pay particular attention to reflection, reasoning and questioning. Autonomy, means having reasons for acting and being “capable of second thoughts in the light of new reasons”, Benn asserts for example. It seems clear that for these thinkers, autonomy is not primarily an issue of acting based on certain preferences or motives; it is first and foremost an issue of forming your own preferences, questioning them and reflecting over them in the first place, which can be done quite independently of acting on them or not.48

Finally, to someone who values autonomy, people’s lack of autonomy is not primarily perceived as a problem that occurs when others do or not do something towards them. If I believe in the value of moral autonomy, I am probably less concerned with the fact that some children may be compelled by their families to attend church or to read sacred texts than by the prospect that these children may never be able to question their own values and beliefs and the origins of these commitments. Valuing autonomy, I take it then, means that one perceives the main problem not to be a person’s un-freedom

48 S. I. Benn, "Freedom, Autonomy and the Concept of a Person," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 66 (1976): 126; John Christman, "Constructing the Inner Citadel: Recent Work on the Concept of Autonomy," Ethics 99, no. 1 (1988), especially see p.115. Elster finally argues we should see autonomy as a ‘residual’, i.e. what is left when we have eliminated all kinds of irrationally shaped desires in Elster, Sour Grapes, Studies in the Subversion of Rationality, 21,24. Is this not just another way of saying what I argue, namely that autonomy is the exercise of forming preferences rationally, which could also be called internal freedom of thought?
vis-à-vis other people, but rather their internal un-freedom, their lack of inner dialogue in which they ask themselves “What do I really think of this?”.

Self-realization: the example of Luke Skywalker

There is a memorable scene in *Starwars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, in which the protagonist Luke Skywalker struggles to lift his own spaceship in order to go rescue his friends and fails. His master Yoda then tells him that he must try until he succeeds, because lifting the spaceship is in fact no harder than lifting a small stone; it is simply a matter of believing in and mustering all the force he already has within himself. I believe in this context, Luke Skywalker’s struggle symbolizes the ideal of self-realization, or of internal freedom of action.

In modern life, there are countless examples of this ideal. How often do not self-help books or therapists tell us that everyone can become a winner if they can just muster the strength to rise above their potentially shady past and their own internalized fears and realize their inner calling. As one of the innumerous self-esteem coaches on the internet puts it: “You can change your life with hard work and a passionate fire in your heart.” She presents a recent American Idol singer Fantasia Barrino, who was a single mother abused by her husband, as a role model:

“…instead of sitting home on welfare whining and crying about being a victim, she pulled herself up by her bootstraps and started working long hard hours on her music career and doing whatever it took to make a better life for herself and her daughter…”

Another self-help internet coach gives parents advice on how to motivate their teenage children to achieve great things in life:

---

49 It may of course very well be argued that in order to actually be an autonomous person, one needs freedom not only from one’s own desires but also from other people. However, remember that I am not out to define autonomy as a psychological state but as an ideal. Consequently, we need to be more specific. This is true even in situations where some might claim that it is in fact the failure of other people to provide person X with alternatives that has caused X’s lack of autonomy. One can argue that others have to blame for X’s lack of autonomy without necessarily claiming that autonomy consists in being free from other people in various ways. The difference between these two deceptively similar approaches can be seen by asking which obstacles could be removed in order for moral autonomy to occur. It is not certain that a child brought up in, say, a fundamentally religious family would have been autonomous, had he only been brought up by other parents who had presented him with alternatives and even encouraged him to think for himself. In other words, we might remove the authoritarian parents and the real obstacle to the child’s autonomy might persist. Likewise, even people in extreme cases of external un-freedom, such as prisoners and slaves, could still be considered completely morally autonomous as long as they were free to think and reflect on their situation with regard to their own desires. In their case, it seems as if no matter how many external barriers they face, this does not prevent them from exercising autonomy.

50 Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 32-33.

51 Ref.!
“The key, I think, is letting them know that having a happy life doing what they want truly comes from within. Was David Beckham born wearing football boots?”

The answer to the rhetorical question is of course “no”. Because, she continues,

“David Beckham has something that without a shadow of a doubt will win over talent any day…. Ambition, determination, persistence, and above all, motivation…. These things come from within.”

This is the self-realization of becoming a winner, which, it is believed, is a dream anyone can realize but not without putting in an effort and “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps”. Wherever we come from, we can overcome our self-doubt and fear of failure and take control over our life as long as we apply ourselves hard enough to the task – that is the message here.

Just as the self-help coaches stress the need to shape up and get on in life, there are other, softer supporters of self-realization, who stress the need for one part of the self (the authentic, uncorrupted self) to take control over other parts of the self, and to assert its own intentions and desires. This is the ideal of letting out the urges of your own inner child instead of allowing it to be suppressed by your rational grown-up self. Children, these ‘self-realizationists’ often argue, should not learn to force themselves to study, to master their anger or to be polite because they know they should. Instead, they should learn through pure curiosity and let out their anger or affection without reflecting much over what is socially accepted or reasonable.

The framework I have proposed here allows us to discover that these two lines of self-realization have two important things in common: they both emphasize freedom from internal enemies and freedom of action. Both kinds of self-realization refuse to be held back in their actions by their own inner enemies, whether these take the form of their rational self, their superego, their fears or their internalized inferiority complex.

Also, I believe my framework highlights the difference between self-realization and moral autonomy, which are often conflated. The difference between Harry Potter’s struggle for moral autonomy and Luke Skywalker’s quest for self-realization lies in the area of freedom they are concerned with. For Harry Potter, freedom must be sought in his own thinking, in his own mind. For Luke Skywalker, freedom must be sought in his actions, he must overcome not inner demons that cloud his judgment, but inner fears that hold him back from taking action in life. I believe it is wise to keep this two things analytically separated, since they may very well logically lead to dif-

52 Ref.
53 Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life, 32-33.
54 Ibid., 33-35, 139.
ferent views on everything from child rearing to what kind of lifestyles the state or other citizens can legitimately promote, discourage or even banish.55

Anti-conformism: the example of Lisa Simpson

Lisa Simpson, one of the main characters in the extremely successful satirical animated sitcom *The Simpsons* from the 1990’s, is the very opposite of a popular girl. She is a precocious nerd and a teacher’s pet who refuses to compromise her ideas and thus often gets isolated from her peers. In fact, she is the favorite character of the creator of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening. This is because Lisa, as he says, epitomizes “idealism and stubbornness” at the same time.56 Whereas her brother Bart simply rebels against any authority, Lisa struggles for a specific freedom, namely that of having her own original tastes and hold opinions that are unaffected by the mediocre majority of her home town Springfield. I believe that this part of Lisa’s character fits well in the upper right box in my framework, as an example of anti-conformism (external freedom of thought).57

John Stuart Mill often argues in typically anti-conformist terms when he says that enemy of free thought primarily consists of the shackles of public opinion. To Mill, thinking differently from others is desirable not only when it expresses someone’s true inner nature, but also by virtue of challenging the ruling opinion, however right it may be. Challenges are vital for a liberal society, Mill holds. No opinion, however sure we might be of its truth, should ever become a dogma that cannot be questioned. If we are not original but merely follow the opinions of the crowd, we are not humans but cattle, Mill disdainfully concludes. On his view, it is mostly others who stand in the way of freedom of thought. For him, those few who dare hold original opinions are “the salt of the earth”. Each human being, Mill seems to assume, has a unique personality; and thus it makes sense to underline the need for each to cultivate what makes him special from the rest: his ‘individuality’.58

55 I realize I must treat this discussion more thoroughly than in this paper. For others who have suggested there is a crucial difference between these two ideals, see for example Isaiah Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990).

56 Ref!

57 Lisa Simpson is not alone in contemporary popular culture; the character of the nerdy yet admirable girl who stands up for herself and refuses to conform is also exemplified by Ally McBeal or Ugly Betty. Ofördigt. I here follow Elster’s distinction between conformity and conformism. Conformity, Elster says, is a desire caused by a drive to be like other people; and anti-conformity is thus the desire not to be caused by such a drive. Conformism is the desire to be like other people, and anti-conformism is the desire not to be like other people. Elster p.22 Elster, *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman*, Studies in the Subversion of Rationality, 67.

58 Consider for example the way Mill defines genius, which he praises and sees as one of the main virtues in society. Some would say that true genius lies in following certain self-imposed rules or in seeing the truth.
My analytical framework has the advantage of distinguishing anti-conformism from the other three ideals of individual independence with which it is often confounded. Clearly, anti-conformism is not the same as the virtue of originality in action (or, as I call it, self-assertion). Thinking and acting differently from others are two different ideals. Indeed, as has been suggested by others before me, once we recognize that Mill and Rousseau often approved of the former but not of the latter, we can solve many of the apparent contradictions in their thinking.59

Anti-conformism is also different from autonomy in that proponents of the former do not equate thinking freely with thinking according to self-imposed rules of reason and consistency, as do proponents of autonomy. Indeed, for Emerson “foolish consistency…is the hobgoblin of little minds”.” With consistency, he says, “a great soul has simply nothing to do”. What matters instead is exercising one’s own thinking (no matter how one does it) unimpaired by others.60

Finally, anti-conformism is different from and may even clash with self-realization, since expressing our true selves may not necessarily be compatible with the idea of being different to and independent of others. We might find the majority of us have a personality that is very much like that of the next person. If our ideal is self-realization, there can be nothing wrong with the scenario that all people are conformist, as long as they are conformist in an authentic way.61 A person who values only self-realization should have no objection against the majority or public opinion as such, as long as it does not lead people to suppress their true selves. Indeed, if public opinion were found to enforce self-realization (as we might expect it to in some individualistic contexts), this may represent a threat to anti-conformism.62

Mill, however, juxtaposes genius to mediocrity and general opinion, defining it as the practice of originality; as thinking in new and different ways. I also think it is correct to conclude that Mill does not seem to demand the same amount of external freedom in actions as he does in thought. For example, he is very much against the cult of assertive and powerful men who take power by force and force others to obey him. Those few dissenters who are the ‘salt of the earth’ that he praises are not made up of an assertive minority of super-humans but rather a minority of anti-conformist thinkers, who are free to cultivate their own character, their own unique personality, John Stuart Mill, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), Ch.III.


60 Elster for example says he “would welcome a proof to the effect that autonomy is incompatible…with anti-conformism”. Elster, Sour Grapes, Studies in the Subversion of Rationality, 23; Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays and Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 261.

An interesting side remark here is that it has often been argued that Swedes lack an interest in the human mind (Berggren och Trägårdh). Instead of interest in anti-conformism, the Swedes are known to value the sometimes stifling ‘Jantelag’, according to which no one should be different from anyone else. I think that it may be particularly interesting to examine whether Swedes, or at least older generations, are perhaps much more individualistic in the other three senses than in this sense. What are the consequences of this? (unfinished) Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, Ar Svensken Människor? Gemeenskap Och Oberoende I Det Moderna Sverige (Stockholm: Norstedts förlag, 2006).

61 Öfändig: This has previously been seen as a conflict between authenticity and originality. Elster, Sour Grapes, Studies in the Subversion of Rationality, 67., Beckman, "Personal Independence and Social Justice: Contradictions of Liberal Virtues," 75-76.
listic Western countries), ‘self-realizationists’ may well applaud and support what is generally considered politically correct.

However, anti-conformists such as Thoreau or Emerson always take the opposite stand to the majority: what right does the majority ever have to force for example self-realization upon a dissenting minority? It is society, according to anti-conformists, that “is everywhere in conspiracy against the manhood of everyone of its members”. What we must liberate ourselves from is thus political correctness, tradition, moral codes, public opinion and the prevailing cultural consensus, rather than our own inner demons of some kind. The cardinal sin for those who defend anti-conformism is not the lack of self-control, self-mastery or authenticity -- but the lack of originality. “Imitation”, says Thoreau, “is suicide.”

Self-assertion: the example of Pippi Longstocking

When Pippi Longstocking, the now widely popular hero from Astrid Lindgren’s series of children’s books, was first ‘born’ in 1945, she caused a moral outrage even among critics in Sweden. In fact, the book was refused by the first publishing house Lindgren approached on the grounds that it gave children a distorted example of how to behave. The reaction seems to have been, and still is, a reaction against the ideal of self-assertion that Pippi epitomizes. She is a truly independent ten-year-old who lives on her own, sleeps with her feet on the pillow, refuses to go to school and ‘medicates’ herself and her neighborhood children with imaginary pills that she believes will prevent children from growing up and never having fun anymore. As many have argued, Pippi displays a specific ideal concerning what is a virtuous life, and both her critics and defenders seem to agree that the core of Pippi’s ideal is to be free to follow one’s impulses instead of having to conform to what others, especially authorities of different kinds, tell you to do.

Pippi wages war on the specific idea that children need to be pruned and disciplined to curb their own will, that their imagination and innate instincts need to be disciplined by rules. Considerable part of her outlook on life consists of preserving her freedom to do what she really wants instead of what the rest of the world, and in particular the grown-ups, tell her to do. Moreover, one of her most conspicuous characteristics is her supernatural strength, which allows her to punish bullies of her own age, to lift up her horse on one arm and to constantly play tricks on the two local policemen Kling and Klang. The kind of freedom she represents is mostly oriented to-


wards doing, as opposed to thinking, what she wants. Thus, I believe Pippi is a good representative of the ideal of external freedom of action – of individualists who value being able to act unrestrained by other people.

As I have already touched upon earlier, ideals of individual independence are often understood as a lack of ideals. This seems to be particularly true for the ideal of self-assertion, which is also perhaps the most intuitive understanding of individual freedom. I believe this misunderstanding can be partly blamed on the mistaken assumption forwarded by John Gray and Isaiah Berlin that freedom is an entity one has whenever one is unconstrained; as opposed to what I have argued, namely that freedom is a relationship one has to a certain activity when one is un-constrained in pursuing it.64

Self-assertion, as I see it, is not just a ‘negative’ ideal that only asks for certain constraints to be removed. It is just as much an ideal concerning what it is that one must be free from something to do, and this something is to take action in one’s life. The ideal of self-assertion is not only to refuse to take orders from others but also to refuse passivity, to stand up where others crouch, to act. It is thus important to see that the ultimate hero of self-assertion is not only an individual who defies anyone who tries to constrain him, but also a person who is free to do what he wants; to change his surroundings, master the nature around him, get on in life and simply get things done. Pippi takes the law into her own hands and punishes evildoers, just as cowboys and superheroes have done in innumerous stories. In this, Pippi Longstocking is a modern version of other classical heroes, such as the free settler, Rambo, the classic Viking, Superman and even Nietzsche’s ‘Übermensch’ – all of them are not only un-constrained by others period, but unconstrained by others in their actions.

**Conclusions: four ideals of individualism**

The reason I call the above ideals of individualism is simply, to repeat, that they all emphasize the inherent value of individual freedom. Yet, they also differ depending on what area of freedom they stress and from whom. The questions they provide answers to are, in that sense, rather different. Supporters of moral autonomy ask: “Am I free to reflect in an unbiased manner on my preferences in life, or is my judgment clouded by my passions?” Defenders of self-realization ask: “Am I free to realize my innermost desires or am I holding myself back?” Proponents of anti-conformism

64 Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”; Gray, “On Negative and Positive Liberty.” The empirical work on individualism in public opinion often departs from this view on the ideal of freedom as only one of being free from others without specifying in what, Flanagan and Lee, “The New Politics, Culture Wars, and the Authoritarian-Libertarian Value Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies,” Inglehart and Welzel, Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy, the Human Development Sequence; Putnam, Bowling Alone the Collapse and Revival of American Community.
ask: “Am I free to think for myself or are others influencing me so that my opinions are not really my own?”. And, finally, supporters of self-assertion ask: “Am I free to act as I please or are other people holding me back?”.

1.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to do three things. First, I have defined the concept of individualism. Secondly, I have specified the concept of individual freedom, to which I suggested that individualism is closely tied. Third, I have sketched the contours of four major conceptions of individualism, there among moral autonomy, that can be incorporated under this concept.

Some may find it strange that in the bulk of this chapter, the term freedom is much more common that that of individualism. This is because, as I tried to show in the first section, I believe individualism does essentially rely on a concept of individual freedom. Of course, I do not deny that the term individualism is often used to denote a multitude of other things such as methodological, religious or economic individualism. My argument in the first section here was, however, that when we speak of individualism in public opinion, we should be concerned with what I call normative rather than descriptive individualism: we should look at the ideals people have that might be called individualistic. The former has been neglected both theoretically and empirically. I further argued that we should regard normative individualism as the belief that individual freedom as inherently valuable. Given that, the task of disentangling the concept of individual freedom became, in fact, crucial for understanding individualism.

In the following section on freedom, I argued there are good reasons to adopt MacCallum’s triadic concept of freedom. He allows us to see freedom as a concept that consists of answers to three questions: Who is the agent whose freedom or un-freedom is under debate? From what constraint is the agent free or un-free? What is it that the agent is free or un-free to do? I further developed MacCallum’s definition by suggesting different possible stands on the ‘constraint variable’ and the ‘area variable’ (since individualism is about individual freedom, I only dealt with conceptions that revolve around an individual agent). The result was a framework that distinguishes between internal and external freedom on the first parameter, and freedom of thought and freedom of action on the other.

In the third section, I briefly considered the four substantial conceptions of individual freedom, or in other words the four ideals of individualism, that resulted from these distinctions. I suggested that the ideal of internal individual freedom of thought is the same as the ideal of moral autonomy, exemplified by Harry Potter and his fight for freedom from his inner demons. I further argued that the ideal of internal individual freedom of action is the
same as the ideal of self-realization, exemplified by Luke Skywalker when he struggles to lift his spaceship and is told by Yoda that he can do it as long as he realizes it is a matter of willpower. I also argued that the ideal of external individual freedom of thought is the same as the ideal of anti-conformism, exemplified by Lisa Simpson who makes an effort to remain original in her opinions and stand out from a crowd. Finally, I discussed why the ideal of external freedom of action is the same as the ideal of self-assertion, exemplified by Pippi Longstocking and her reluctance to be governed and confined in her actions by authorities and rules. Some of these ideals are often confused and bundled up together under one of these four names. As I tried to show, however, we gain much clarity by keeping these four ideals analytically distinct.

My main argument in this chapter has been that, quite independently of empirical findings, we have theoretical reasons first to acknowledge that there is a normative side to individualism, and, secondly, within normative individualism we must distinguish between the four ideals of moral autonomy, self-realization, anti-conformism and self-assertion.

To some extent, I believe all four ideals are present in our contemporary individualistic culture. The question I turn to in the following chapters is: are they all held by the same people; or is it rather the case that most people emphasize one of them more than the other, or even dislike some of them while cherishing others? 65

---

**Literature**


---

65 I have begun testing these things; and a preliminary study I conducted this summer based on Dutch and Swedish attitude data showed that individualism exists in at least two different kinds. One dimension is reminiscent of self-assertion, thus I called it the Pippi Longstocking Factor. The other dimension was harder to interpret, but consisted of items such as “attention to be open to new ideas” and “attention to allowing people to have more say”; thus I called it the Lisa Simpson factor. Secondly, I also found clear indications that these two factors of individualism were not correlated with hedonism, achievement values, egotism or alienation. In other words, it does indeed seem as if I am right in suggesting that people who value individual freedom of different kinds are not necessarily hedonists and egoists, and do not necessarily also condone free-riding; nor do they believe that there are no universally valid moral guidelines for life.


