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'Freedom and Desire'

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Muddles can be instructive. The clarifying confusion to be examined in this paper is Isaiah Berlin's intelligent vacillation on the issue of whether or not the extent of a person's freedom depends on his desires.[1] Is the amount of freedom an agent possesses determined solely by his objective circumstances or is it also partly a function of his subjective tastes and preferences? In clarifying this question I shall suggest that Berlin has trouble answering it because he almost perceives that interpersonal car-

1 Isaiah Berlin, 'Introduction' and 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969), ix-lxiii and 118-72. Further references to this book are given in parentheses in the text.

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dinal measurement of freedom, if possible at all, is possible only on a subjective basis.[2] Yet as Berlin eloquently reminds us measuring freedom according to a subjective metric generates paradox. Whether commonsense ideas of freedom are consistent and reasonable is not purely an academic issue, for we do often make political judgments to the effect that one or another policy, or a movement to one or another form of society, can be expected to reduce or enlarge human freedom. If freedom is not measurable these judgments are merely hortatory.

This paper concentrates on one issue, the meshing of freedom and desire, to the exclusion of other significant puzzles regarding the nature of freedom. I do not attempt a full analysis of the concept of freedom. Nor do I have much to say about Berlin's celebrated reasons for championing 'negative' conceptions of liberty against 'positive' rivals. I should also mention that the terms 'liberty' and 'freedom' are interchangeable in this paper.

My starting point is Berlin's preferred negative conception of liberty, according to which the extent of a person's freedom centrally involves the question, 'What is the area within which the subject — a person or group of persons — is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons' (121-2).

In the terms of this spatial metaphor, my question is: how do we measure the 'area' within which the person's opportunities for action are not constrained by the interference of other agents? I here presume that measurement will somehow involve identifying and measuring the opportunities or options for action available to the individual in various settings. To measure freedom one must measure options, but unfortunately options turn out to be elusive entities.

Suppose the police arrest Smith and Jones, and the question arises, whose freedom is more greatly diminished at the hands of the police. Smith is interrogated and quickly released onto the streets, and resumes the normal freedom to live as he chooses, except that his thumbs have been hurt slightly and require splints. Jones is confined to a cell, and bound tightly from head to foot like a mummy, except that his thumbs protrude from his binding. Jones is then free to do nothing save move his thumbs back and forth. He can, however, move his thumbs in an indefinitely large number of trivially different ways, so it would seem that

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2 But see the text under section (VII) below.

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he is free to choose among an indefinitely large agglomeration of possible actions, each of these actions being a variety of thumb-wiggling. Regarding the extent of their freedom, then, Smith and Jones would appear to be on a par, for each has suffered a loss of countless options of action at the hands of the police, and each has remaining countless options from which to choose.[3] Of course common sense will nonetheless see Smith as suffering far less restriction of freedom than Jones. The basis for so distinguishing Smith and Jones is the reasonable presumption that a great many options that matter to Smith are left open, while the options Jones cares about are foreclosed. (To see that this is the presumption that sways our judgment, imagine it altered: both Smith and Jones are fanatical adherents of an obscure religion which places overwhelming value on the performance each day of a great array of devotional exercises performed with the thumbs.) There may be ways of specifying how to count a person's options for the purpose of measuring his freedom that do not appeal to the desires and interests of the person whose freedom is being measured, yet do not give wildly counter-intuitive results for cases like the one we have been discussing.[4] None, however, has been developed in any detail to date in the literature on freedom. The conclusion to which we seem to be drawn is that variations on an act count as distinct options only to the degree that the differences among the variations are judged significant by the acting person. The individuation of options is relative to what matters to us.

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3 The example in the text is a variant of one used by P.H. Partridge to urge a similar point in 'Freedom,' in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan Publishing and the Free Press 1967), 223.

4 A possible alternate basis for distinguishing options is degree of perceptual dissimilarity. For example if we take photographs of Smith's thumb-wiggling options, he and we will have difficulty distinguishing one from another. Whereas if Smith has to choose between walking in the Grand Canyon, trekking over Arctic wastes, and strolling along a Paris boulevard, he and we will readily distinguish these options even if he is as utterly uninterested in their differences as he is in the differences among various thumb gestures. Yet the walking options might seem significantly distinct options that do enlarge Smith's freedom, whatever his desires. But perceptual dissimilarity doesn't begin to be a generalizable criterion. Writing a check for $1 is from many standpoints perceptually indistinguishable from writing a check for $1,000,000. Section (IV) below suggests another way of handling the walking/wiggling examples.

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Although Berlin does not explicitly call attention to this line of thought, its pressure on his essay is apparent.

If freedom is to be measured by counting a person's options as weighted by their importance to that person, then quite obviously one possible strategy for enlarging one's freedom is to bring it about that one takes an enlarged view of the significance of one's available options. In Berlin's words, 'If I find that I am able to do little or nothing of what I wish, I need only contract or extinguish my wishes, and I am made free' (139). This stoic strategy Berlin labels the 'retreat to an inner citadel' (135) and characterizes as a 'sublime' form of the 'doctrine of sour grapes' (139); for him any analysis of the concept of freedom that permits freedom to be increased in this way thereby shows its inadequacy.

What troubles Berlin about the stoic strategy can be brought out by contrasting two slaves, one contented, one discontented, both being subject to exactly the same restrictions. The contented slave succeeds in adjusting his desires to his opportunities so that they mesh perfectly. He attaches no more value whatsoever to the satisfaction of any desire except the desire to do whatever his master commands. In contrast, the discontented slave finds that he is free to do precious little of what matters to him. Surely this example shows that the satisfaction of desire or the fulfillment of one's personal values is one thing and freedom quite another. Berlin proceeds to envisage an even more depressing scenario, in which the source of the slave's contentment is not any self-conditioning process voluntarily undertaken, rather a conditioning process imposed by the master in order to reconcile the slave to his situation (139-40). Surely becoming reconciled to one's situation in this fashion does not render that situation one of freedom. Yet before this conviction attracts our unqualified allegiance, we recall the reasons questioning the possibility of counting a person's options except as weighted by his desires. Clearly we have a problem.

A flickering recognition of this difficulty is registered in a famous footnote in Berlin's essay:

> The extent of my freedom seems to depend on (a) how many possibilities are open to me (although the method of counting these can never be more than impressionistic. Possibilities of action are not discrete entities like apples, which can be exhaustively enumerated); (b) how easy or difficult each of these possibilities is to actualize; (c) how important in my plan of life, given my character and circumstances, these possibilities are when compared with each other; (d) how far they are open and closed by deliberate human acts; (e) what

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> value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives, puts on the various possibilities. (130)

Now (c), as several commentators have noticed, appears to permit precisely what Berlin appears to want to deny in the 'inner citadel' or 'sour grapes' discussion – namely, that the stoic strategy can enlarge one's freedom. Proviso (e) might be calculated to prevent (c) from generating counter-intuitive judgments regarding examples such as that of the contented slave. Even if the slave succeeds in ridding himself of the desires that slavery frustrates, a consensus in the culture to the effect that the options slavery denies are of great value will suffice to show that despite appearances the contented slave has very little freedom. If this is the aim of proviso (e), it fails of its purpose. The dominant sentiment in slave societies tends to be that slaves are inferior creatures who require regimentation for their own good. When the contented slave discounts his desire say to roam about the countryside at will he is following, not opposing, the conventional evaluation of that option by his society. Anyway it is odd to think that how others evaluate a person's options should even partially determine the extent of that very person's freedom. It is peculiar to hold that the amount of freedom a person possesses rises and falls depending on the vicissitudes of cultural fads in which he does not participate.

Note also that in the footnote quoted from a paragraph back, Berlin cannot decide whether freedom is measurable or not. To ask whether a given policy would raise one person's freedom more than it would lower the freedom of three others taken together is, he asserts, 'logically absurd.' Measuring can only be impressionistic. Yet, 'we can give valid reasons for saying that the average subject of the King of Sweden is, on the whole, a good deal freer than the average citizen of Spain or Albania' (130). Since both these judgments involve cardinal inter-personal comparisons of freedom, the distinction Berlin draws between them is obscure to me. How can one measure averages without measuring the instances from which averages are calculated?[5]

Berlin returns to the stoic strategy problem with a sense of chagrin in his 'Introduction' to the 1969 reprint of his essay. He acknowledges that in the original 'Two Concepts' he both denies and permits the stoic

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5 That this question is not merely rhetorical is shown by the example of mean kinetic energy. But anyone who thinks freedom is measurable on a macro- but not on a micro-level owes us an account of how this is so.

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strategy, and undertakes to set matters straight. He writes: 'The Stoic sense of freedom, however sublime, must be distinguished from the freedom or liberty which the oppressor, or the oppressive institutionalized practise, curtails or destroys' (xxxix). To characterize the latter idea of freedom he employs a metaphor of doors open and shut:

> The sense of freedom, in which I use this term, entails not simply the absence of frustration (which may be obtained by killing desires), but the absense of obstacles to possible choices and activities – absence of obstructions on roads along which a man can decide to walk. Such freedom ultimately depends not on whether I wish to walk at all, or how far, but on how many doors are open, how open they are, upon their relative importance in my life, even though it may be impossible literally to measure this in any quantitative fashion. The extent of my social or political freedom consists in the absence of obstacles not merely to my actual, but to my potential choices – to my acting in this or that way if I choose to do so. Similarly absence of such freedom is due to the closing of such doors or the failure to open them... (xxxix-x1)

As John Gray has noticed, Berlin's inclusion of the phrase 'upon their relative importance in my life' readmits the stoic strategy once again.[6] It is as though Berlin has spun all the way round in a revolving door and returned to the starting point he supposedly wished to abandon. Berlin's nervous disclaimer of the possibility of 'quantitative' measurement is also puzzling, for the problem of the contented slave pursuing his stoic strategy only arises on the supposition that freedom does admit of measurement.

My instinct is that there is something worth developing in Berlin's suggestion that the extent of one's freedom is a function of one's potential as well as actual desires. As it stands, however, the main difficulty with Berlin's 'open doors' metaphor is that it tends to beg the crucial question of how to identify and count options available to a person. For we have a reasonably clear idea of what a door is and how to tell whether it is open or shut, whereas the difficulty in measuring freedom is precisely that the notion of an 'option' is not so comfortably determinate. Once it is agreed to identify the problem of measuring freedom with the problem of counting open and closed doors, the idea that the extent of one's freedom varies with one's desires comes to look silly, for surely the question of

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6 John Gray, 'On Negative and Positive Liberty,' *Political Studies*, **28** (1980) 507-26; see esp. 521.

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how many doors I am free to enter is independent of the question whether I want to enter any of them.

In an essay addressed to Berlin's problem Joel Feinberg gives a more elegant version of this metaphor, but even as refined the metaphor remains an unsuitable basis for discussion. Feinberg asks us to 'think of life as a kind of maze of railroad tracks connected and disjoined, here and there, by switches. Where there is an unlocked switch, which can be pulled one way or the other, there is an 'open option,' wherever the switch is locked in one position the option is closed.'[7] In the terms of this metaphor, I suppose we are to think of the extent of our freedom as given by the length of track we are free to travel upon, or by the number of switches we can reach, or perhaps by a weighted sum of these two rankings. The metaphor, which Feinberg cautiously notes is 'inadequate in a number of respects,' admirably helps us to see the relevance to the measure of our freedom of what Feinberg calls the 'fecundity' of our options: the more an option opens the way to further options, the more fecund it is. Still, the major difficulty is that the railroad maze metaphor like the open doors metaphor is question-begging with respect to the point at issue between those who assert and those who deny that how an option meshes with our desires affects the extent to which having the option enlarges our freedom. *If* options of action are like switches on railroad tracks, then clearly the identification of options is not relative to desire. But are options like that? The metaphor by itself does not give any guidance in resolving this question but only arbitrarily prejudges it.

What are we to make of Berlin's wobbling on the issue which the open doors metaphor only very feebly tries to settle? When a theorist of distinction announces, 'here is a mistake which I have made and which I shall now correct,' and then proceeds to offer a revised position in which the original 'mistake' survives fully intact, this is a clue that the supposed mistake contains a truth which resists easy assimilation into the structure of our thought. In this case, the 'mistake' that haunts Berlin's account of freedom is the *desire thesis: The amount of freedom a person possesses varies directly with the extent to which his desires (or personal values) are satisfiable under the options available to him.* Considering the case of the contented slave, it would seem that we must reject the desire thesis in order to sustain our firm conviction that the contented slave is not more

7 Joel Feinberg, 'The Interest in Liberty on the Scales,' in A.I. Goldman and J. Kim, eds., *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel 1978), 27. The next quote in the text is from 28.

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free than the discontented slave similarly situated. Is what seems so really so? Let us explore the possibilities for saving the desire thesis or some portion thereof in the teeth of brave new world examples.

The comparison of the contented and the discontented slave raises several issues at once, some of them in an aggravated form. Before we can reasonably decide whether the example should budge us from the desire thesis, these several issues need separate consideration. In what follows I isolate seven such issues and try to determine to what extent they motivate rejection or revision of the desire thesis.

I. Formation-of-desire worries

Suppose you were the subject of a tyrant or slave master who forcibly attached an electrode to your head, or beamed a special ray at you, the effect of which was to cause you to desire whatever the tyrant or master wishes you to desire. The tyrant can alter your desires at will by means of a mechanical device that he controls. In this extreme case manipulation of your desires can bring it about that your desires are perfectly satisfied no matter what restrictions are imposed on you, but it is counterintuitive to say that this meshing of desire and opportunity for satisfaction increases your freedom. Yet a refusal to judge that here freedom varies directly with the extent to which desires are satisfiable is not tantamount to rejection of the desire thesis. For the desires satisfied are not *your* desires; desires are yours only when they are of 'home growth.'[8] In less extreme cases it will be controversial whether the desires an individual experiences as his own are properly to be counted as his, given that some suspect process has tampered with their formation. I don't believe the literature on freedom has succeeded in articulating any clear criterion for separating the desires of home growth from those of alien growth, but that doesn't matter for present purposes. What does matter is to understand that moral qualms about the processes that form desires, qualms that are certainly present in some versions of the contented slave examples, do not supply any reason to reject or revise the desire thesis. Rather, they simply show that its phrase 'his desires' requires careful glossing.

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8 J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 18, J.M. Robson, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1977), 265.

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Moreover, it is important to notice that even if we had a clear criterion for counting desires as one's own for the purposes of measuring one's freedom with the help of the desire thesis, that would not alleviate all the concerns that the contented slave example prompts. To see this, recall that the contented slave may have attained his contentment by means of a voluntarily undertaken desire alteration therapy, rather than through any process of manipulation or deliberate conditioning at the hands of another. Whatever exactly desires of home growth turn out to be, desires that the individual voluntarily strives to attain will uncontroversially qualify as home-grown. Without impugning the process by which the contented slave acquires the desires that render him contented, we are yet unwilling to allow his contentment to count as freedom.

In an interesting essay Jon Elster has denied this last point. He agrees with Berlin that one should not equate freedom with freedom to do what one wants, regardless of the causal origins of those wants. Instead Elster identifies the extent of a person's freedom with the extent to which the person is free to satisfy home-grown or what Elster calls 'autonomous' wants: 'Being a free man is to be free to do all the things that one autonomously wants to do.'[9] In section (VI) below I argue against identifying freedom with the satisfiability of any constellation of wants, home-grown or otherwise.

II. Conflation of autonomy and freedom

Moral autonomy as conceived in the tradition of Kant and Rousseau is an admirable character trait and as such is to be sharply distinguished from freedom as a social benefit, the latter being the concern of political philosophy and of this essay. A person is morally autonomous to the degree that she acts only so as to conform to self-imposed rules; as Rousseau says, 'moral liberty' is 'obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves.'[10] Presumably there is a dispositional element to autonomy

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9 Jon Elster, 'Sour Grapes,' in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Beyond Utilitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 227-8. Elster's phrase 'being a free man' leaves it unclear whether he is talking about freedom as a social benefit one might receive or as a desirable character trait one might achieve.

10 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, tr. G.D.H. Cole (London: Dent, Everyman ed. 1963), 16.

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as well. If life happens to make it very easy for a person to act autonomously, but we have good reason to believe that the person was ready to forfeit her autonomy in the presence of even a modest temptation, to that extent we judge the person less morally autonomous than if she were disposed to stand fast by self-imposed rules come what may. Autonomy so understood is a possession of a certain sort of character. Normally attainment of autonomy is an achievement, perhaps requiring heroic effort of will, though in some cases persons attain autonomy effortlessly. Now obviously moral autonomy construed in this way is not the same as freedom construed as a benefit that can be doled out to a person, consisting in a range of opportunity open to that person. The distinction is slightly trickier, but still manifest, if we understand freedom as a meshing of opportunity and desire, attainable either by altering opportunities to fit antecedent desires or by altering desires to fit antecedent opportunities. In either case possession of freedom might represent an achievement; perhaps one had to fight to gain the opportunities or struggle to change one's desires. But in ascribing autonomy to a person we are saying she behaves or is disposed to behave a certain way, whereas in ascribing freedom to a person we are saying she stands in a relationship to her environment that counts as having a benefit (however she might choose to behave or not behave in response to the benefit).[11] If we failed to mark the distinction between autonomy and freedom, and if we judged the contented slave to be lacking in autonomy, through confusion we might wrongly think that this judgment has some relevance to the question of how much freedom the contented slave possesses. Ordinary usage of the terms 'freedom,' 'autonomy,' and 'liberty' is not regimented at all in terms of the distinction we have been describing, so the distinction is easy to miss.

To say a person is morally autonomous is to say nothing about her situation. A person can be fully morally autonomous while subject to the most extreme deprivation of freedom. Think of an imprisoned person who steadfastly refuses to betray her cause or to reveal secrets under interrogation and torture. But we might have good empirical grounds for suspecting that some situations are more hospitable to the development and maintenance of widespread moral autonomy than others, and these suspicions could provide autonomy-regarding grounds for favoring one

11 This formulation is an attempt to improve on the characterization of the distinction between freedom and autonomy in my 'Mill versus Paternalism,' *Ethics*, 90 (1980) 470-89; see esp. 475-7.

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or another social situation. Such suspicions might well be part of our grounds for hating slavery. I myself believe these suspicions to be well-founded. My point again is simply to insist that opposition to slave institutions based upon the tendency of slavery to breed heteronomous character has nothing to do with the further question of how to measure how much freedom a contented slave possesses. These matters are quite independent of one another.

Freedom and autonomy can come in conflict. For example, consider Rousseau's choice between residence in Paris or in Geneva. Living in Paris offers more freedom but will cause one's disposition to autonomy to be weakened. Freedom and autonomy can be rival values, but it is misleading to think of them as rival specifications of the same concept. One of the reasons that Berlin's celebrated antithesis between negative and positive liberty is confusing is that he bundles under the positive category conceptions of freedom in competition with their negative cousins along with various other values (such as autonomy) that, on his understanding of them, could not be candidate conceptions of freedom at all. The negative and positive contrast as Berlin draws it is not a contrast between two families of ideas about freedom but between one family and a menagerie.[12]

III. Strategic choice of desires

Let us say a desire for something is *basic* if that thing is desired for its own sake, not as a means to some further end. Let us also stipulate that what is basically desired is valued – if I experience a craving and consider that satisfying the craving would be worthless, such a craving is not a basic desire. 'Basic desire' is roughly synonymous with 'personal value.' To some extent, such desires are chosen in the light of our circumstances, and in choosing desires we may be making the best of a bad situation. One might hold that sometimes an individual can just adopt a desire more or less at will, or one might hold that one can choose one's desires only indirectly, by choosing to act in ways that one reasonably predicts

12 For this criticism, see Marshall Cohen, 'Berlin and the Liberal Tradition,' *Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (1960) 216-27; see esp. 221-4; and W.A. Parent, 'Some Recent Work on the Concept of Liberty,' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 11 (1974) 149-67; see esp. 149-52.

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will give rise to a certain desire.[13] Either way, the point still holds that in order to further our goals we may choose to bring it about that we acquire a new basic desire. If I am choosing basic desires in order to make a prudent adjustment to a terrible situation, a situation let us say of little liberty, there is a natural reluctance to judge that my success in following this rationally prudent strategy increases my freedom. After all my situation does not change, *I* do.

This reluctance to credit the stoic strategy with increasing one's freedom is, so far as I can see, completely independent of our evaluation of the desires chosen for such strategic, prudential reasons. Enslavement by a cultured master might supply motivation to alter one's desires in the direction of the 'higher' pleasures. Still, one might deny that the resultant fit between what the slave comes to want and what the master demands is a good reason to judge the contented slave more free than he would have been had he stayed discontented, unregenerately attached to the 'lower' pleasures. To the extent that unease of this sort underlies our reaction to the contented slave problem, it is doubtful that the appropriate lesson to be learned from this problem is that on the basis of our objective knowledge of the Good Life for Man we should discount the satisfaction of slavish desires because such satisfactions will block the slave's attainment of a Good Life. Hence I disagree with John Gray's proposal for coping with the contented slave problem, if I understand him. He writes: 'Only by invoking some norm of human nature which is discriminatory as to the wants which are to be counted, and which includes evaluations of the agent's states of mind, can the intuition that the wholly contented slave remains unfree be supported.[14] But I have isolated a reason for discriminating wants and wants, and denying that the satisfiability of the desires of the rationally prudent contented slave contributes to his freedom, and I further claim my reason makes no appeal to a norm of human nature nor to any negative evaluation of the slave's mental states. We may applaud the exemplary prudent adaptive behavior of the slave

13 Gilbert Harman argues that sometimes one can choose one's desires directly, in 'Practical Reasoning,' *The Review of Metaphysics*, **29** (1976) 431-63; see esp. 457-63.

14 Gray, 521; also 515. See also William Connolly's argument to the effect that extant socialist conceptions of positive freedom fail to warrant the judgment that the contented slave 'who thoroughly internalizes the slave mentality is thoroughly unfree,' in 'A Note on Freedom under Socialism,' *Political Theory*, **5** (1977) 461-72; see esp. 464.

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while denying that the alterations of desire he contrives enlarge his freedom.

However, it will not do to qualify the desire thesis so: strategically chosen basic desires are to be excluded from the calculation of the degree to which a person's desires are satisfiable under given options. This will not do because on this proposal, if my desires change through any process except deliberate choice, the resultant change in the degree of fit between my options and my desires will affect the extent of my freedom — whereas if I deliberately and self-consciously and successfully seek to alter my basic desires to gain some further goal, the resultant changes in the fit between my options and desires will have no impact whatever on my freedom. This does not square with common sense.

IV. Vital and inert options

Part of the basis for the judgment that the contented slave possesses very little freedom is assessment along a dimension not yet charted. Suppose a person is considering the impact on his freedom of a new option which he presently lacks and which a proposed policy would grant to him. Let us say an option is *vital* for a person to the extent that its very availability will bring it about that the person acquires an increased basic desire either for having the option or exercising it or both. An option is *inert* to the extent that its very availability will have no effect on the basic desires of the person regarding that option. (In passing we note the possibility of *morbid* options whose very availability lessens people's basic desires for them. In the case of extremely morbid options, you want them only so long as you cannot have them.) The 'very availability' of an option enhances its attraction if the following holds: a person notices or samples the option, or notices other persons noticing or sampling it, or hears persuasive arguments for the desireability of the option (none of which would have happened had the option been unavailable), and in consequence acquires a heightened appreciation of it. Also, the greater the amount of time that elapses before an option, once made available, has an influence on basic desires, the less the vitality of the option.

The suggestion I wish to make is that judgments of the vitality and inertness of options affect our measurements of freedom. The more a proposed change in a person's situation makes vital options available to the person, the more that change increases that person's freedom, other things being equal. Our confidence that making arbitrary finger-wiggling

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options available to an imprisoned man does not increase his freedom is a function of our confidence that those options are utterly inert for him, and similarly our judgment that emancipation would render the perfectly contented slave more free reflects our judgment that many of the options emancipation makes available are extremely vital for the slave. A sign that this is so is that where our confidence proves misplaced, our judgments of freedom shift. If Dr. Manette is so devastated by Bastille imprisonment that release from prison will neither help him to satisfy his present wants nor have any impact upon his future wants, release does not give an increase of freedom. To decide whether ceding an option to a person enhances his freedom, one must consider not just his present wants but his future wants as well, at least where the availability of the option itself affects his wants.

It may be doubted that considering the vitality of options helps to distinguish the case of a slave about to be freed from the case of a free man about to be enslaved. Granting that the options that emancipation opens are vital, we may wonder if the same is not true of the options that enslavement gives. Suppose that slaves are permitted a midafternoon break for a smoke. A rest period for smoking might hold no attraction for a person before enslavement, while under conditions of slavery this option might come to be relished. Does the vitality of this option give reason to think that enslavement increases freedom? Perhaps one could maintain that it is not the very availability of the smoking option that enhances its attractiveness for the slave, rather the fact that the person has been deprived of other and much more valued options. But there is no need to deny that there could be a case in which the new availability of an option, when other options are restricted, does render that option more attractive than it was previously. This does not undermine the claim that as a matter of fact such cases are rare, so considering vitality does introduce an asymmetry into the situation of the free man and the slave as regards their comparative freedom.

If I am right that the extent to which an option increases a person's freedom depends on its vitality for that person, this fact explains how Berlin could have thought that the extent of an individual's freedom depends on the evaluation that the 'general sentiment of the society' (130) puts on the possibilities of action open to that individual. Prevailing views as to the value of an option are not criteria of its vitality, but they surely are very reliable indicators. Humans are sufficiently similar that if most people find an option grows more attractive once it is made available, that is evidence that any given person will respond similarly. Berlin's point is then not true, but close to true.

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It should be evident that the claim that the vitality of an option affects the extent to which it contributes to freedom is compatible with the spirit and letter of the desire thesis. The more vital are a person's newly acquired options, the more the person's desires will change in response to these options so that they come to be highly valued. Other things being equal, the more a shift to a new situation provides vital options, the greater the extent to which the person's desires (weighted by their importance) will be satisfiable in the new situation, compared to the old one. Other things being equal, an option that once made available would enhance your desire for it, adds more to your freedom than an inert option that has negligible impact upon desire. Only your own desires, not anybody else's, determine the extent of your freedom. But the desires that you would come to have in given situations, as well as the desires that you now actually have, play a role in deciding the extent of your freedom.

Any analysis of freedom must allow that freedom is one value among others, that persons sometimes choose lesser freedom. The desire thesis might seem to threaten to collapse freedom into desire satisfaction. If a person finds her desires more easily satisfiable after a change, doesn't this show her freedom is thereby increased? Noticing that the vitality of options affects their contribution to freedom permits us to avert the threatened disappearance of freedom as a distinctive value. Consider two persons who choose to remain in military service rather than enter civilian life. One person places no value on the options that military life lacks and civilian life makes available, and moreover correctly believes that the availability of these civilian options would not enhance their attractiveness. The second person foresees that civilian life would introduce options whose availability would induce undesired changes in her desires. To avoid this result, which she identifies as corruption, the second person remains in the military. On my view the second person is choosing to have less freedom, while from what has been said so far the first person would not gain in freedom by opting for civilian life.

There is another reason why acceptance of the desire thesis need not lead to conflation of freedom and happiness construed as overall high level of satisfaction of desire. Desires can be satisfiable in a situation but not actually satisfied in that situation, if we allow that an agent can fail to satisfy his desires due to various incapacities.[15] It may be prudent for a

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15 I assume here something like the usual contrast between freedom and incapacity

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person to prefer one situation to another, even though more of his desires are satisfiable under the second, if he has good reason to believe that more of his desires will actually be satisfied under the first. Here prudence and the aim of maximizing one's freedom are in conflict.

V. Satisfiability and Choice

A powerful objection to the desire thesis is that it 'blurs the distinction between liberty and compulsion.' According to 'the theory of liberty as the absence of barriers to one's actual desires,'[16] a person who is forced or compelled to a single course of action is nonetheless perfectly free if that action is the one he most wants to do. This is taken as a reductio of the desire thesis. But consider: the desire thesis implies that the person forced to do what he wants to do is entirely free only if it is also true that (1) the person's desires are his own, of home not alien growth, (2) the person attaches no value to having or to exercising *any* of the indefinite variety of

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or inability. So far as my freedom goes, my desire to swim is satisfiable in a situation if nothing prevents me from satisfying that desire except my own inability to swim. I rely on the freedom/capacity contrast but find it problematic. Compare Smith's freedom and mine in two cases. Smith is very much stronger than I am, and has quicker reflexes. Park rules being liberal, he and I are equally free to climb El Capitan, but I lack the ability to do so. Now suppose the highwayman brandishing a knife says to each of us, 'Your money or your life.' My freedom is restricted; I am forced to hand over my money. By virtue of his personal endowments, Smith can disarm the highwayman effortlessly, costlessly, at no risk to himself, without suffering moral qualms. His freedom is not restricted by the threat; he is as free to do whatever he wants with his money after the threat as prior to it. Let us suppose the very same differences in our capacities explain why Smith, unlike me, is able to climb and to remain free under the highwayman's threat. In each case the external circumstances we face are identical. In one case incapacity is properly said to affect the amount of freedom an agent has, but not in the other. What explains this asymmetry? Note also that the desire thesis commences a slide away from the stance of denying that internal constraints affect one's freedom. If my desires affect the extent of my freedom, why not likewise my degree of self-knowledge, the extent to which I am tangled by neurosis, and so on to my other capacities? On this point see Charles Taylor, 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?', in Alan Ryan, ed., *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1979), 175-93.

16 Feinberg, 29

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options foreclosed by compulsion, and (3) it is not the case that the person would come to value any of the presently foreclosed options if they were opened to him. The conditions are stringent, and if they should be met, the conclusion they license would not be blatantly counterintuitive.

A further move is possible to reconcile the desire thesis with common sense.[17] Suppose I have five desires, which as a matter of fact cannot be satisfied together. In situation A only one desire, the one I judge most important, is satisfiable. In situation B any of my five desires is satisfiable, though no more than one can actually be satisfied. The theory of liberty as the absence of barriers to one's actual desires can allow that I have more freedom in B than in A; my desire-weighted range of choice is more extensive in B. This reading of the theory depends on how we understand the term 'satisfiable' in the desire thesis. In B, but not in A, all five of my desires are disjunctively satisfiable. Taking satisfiability to include disjunctive satisfiability, the desire thesis accommodates the intuition that more freedom is found in B.

So far, my discussion has tried to weave a plausible case for the desire thesis. From now on, the tendency of my discussion will be to unravel that fabric.

VI. Doubts that options are really uncountable except as individuated by desires

The restrictions imposed on the contented and on the discontented slave may be qualitatively the same. Their situations hem them in equally. Hence, there is a tendency to conclude, the contented and the discontented slave must be equally unfree, contrary to the desire thesis, and contrary to what must be the premature skepticism about measuring freedom independently of desire, voiced early in this essay. Anxiety about how to individuate an agent's options can find no toehold on the slick claim that in this case, since the repressive situations of the contented and discontented slaves are identical, their options must be the same whatever the number of those options might be. In short, the contented slave example poses a challenge to the argument given earlier to the conclusion that measurements of freedom can only be measurements

17 I owe this point to G.A. Cohen.

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of the important options available to a person, that is to say, of his options as weighted by desires. Let us accordingly revisit that argument.

First of all, shifting attention from the options open to a person to the restraints imposed on him does nothing to resolve perplexities of measurement. Suppose I clamp a ten-pound weight on the back of a strapping athlete, who finds the weight a minor annoyance, and an identical weight on the back of an invalid, who becomes helplessly pinned down, unable to move. Must we say the athlete and the invalid suffer equal deprivation of freedom because they are subject to equal restraint? (Under some descriptions, of course, the restraints are not equal. What description is privileged?)

Nonetheless, discussion of the Smith-and-Jones example moved too swiftly to the conclusion that options cannot be counted except via desires. In a sense I cheated in stipulating that both of Smith's thumbs were bound. For if the example is varied slightly, so that Smith has one thumb bound and poor Jones has one thumb free, then Smith clearly has more options, and the example no longer seems to conjure up generalized skepticism about counting options. Whatever movements Jones can make with his freed thumb, Smith can echo with his freed thumb, and in addition Smith can do much else not involving thumb-wiggling. In general, one might say, one person has a greater number of options than another if for every action the second person can perform, the first person can echo or copy it, plus do other things as well.[18] The echoing of action involving institutional facts is not just a matter of copying movements. If I own stock, and you do not, when I call my broker and sell my stock you can mimic my movements but you cannot be performing an action like mine. Echoing in such cases must include a parallel institutional context conferring an equivalent significance on the echoing movements. Your action echoing my stock sale must result in a transfer of funds to your bank account.

There are occasions when comparison of options independently of desire is possible, but the occasions are few and far between. They do not include Berlin's example of measuring freedom in Sweden and freedom in Albania, nor do we have an objective basis for comparing the number of options of a freed slave as against those of a contented slave. In these

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18 I borrow this notion of 'echoing' from Jonathan Bennett, 'Morality and Consequences,' in Sterling McMurrin, ed., *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press 1981), 63-4.

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cases each party to be compared has options which the other cannot echo, so the 'objective' count oddly yields a tie.

It is easy to overestimate the number of cases in which neutral counting gives a decisive comparison. Suppose that in one society people are free to worship in public as they choose, but are subject to traffic regulation. In another society people are forbidden public worship, but are subject to no traffic regulation. Charles Taylor, from whom I have borrowed this example, asserts that since people worship only on Sunday and join in traffic each day, 'In sheer quantitative terms, the number of acts restricted by traffic lights must be greater than that restricted by a ban on public religious practise.'[19] I don't see this. Taylor must be assuming that we can individuate and count the number of acts restricted by some interference without invoking a desire-weighted or evaluative principle of individuation. The Smith-and-Jones example above shows this assumption to be false. Neutral counting works only when one can exactly match two sets of action options so that all of one set is exactly echoed by a counterpart in the other, and then individuation within the area of overlap is not needed for measurement to proceed (and further, I claim, individuation beyond the area of overlap cannot be achieved on a neutral basis).

The bare possibility of the neutral counting of options in some cases does enforce a rejection of the unqualified desire thesis. Judgments of freedom employing the method of neutral counting can conflict straightforwardly with the judgments arrived at through the desire thesis, as in this simple example: initially, Smith is free to go to the beach or the desert. His one dominant desire is to go to the desert. Then restriction on hill travel is lifted, so that Smith is now free to go to the beach or the desert or the hills. With this expansion in options comes an alteration in Smith's aspirations. His one dominant desire now is to go to the mountains, but mountain travel is still forbidden. According to neutral counting, Smith has more freedom in the second scenario; according to the desire thesis, his freedom in greater in the first scenario. But the idea that one can diminish a person's freedom by expanding his options is worse than paradoxical. We had better add an 'other things being equal' rider to the desire thesis, and admit that when neutral counting unequivocally finds in one situation more freedom than in another, then so far as the

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19 Taylor, 183. Taylor's aim is not to defend 'this quantitative conception of freedom' but to show that it 'is a non-starter.'

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desire thesis is concerned, other things are not equal. Notice also that this counterexample to the desire thesis is equally effective against Elster's autonomous-desire thesis. For in a slight modification of the example we can suppose that Smith's initial dominant desire for desert travel is the result of a deliberate and voluntary process of self-transformation of character. Even so, when Smith's options are expanded his freedom expands, at least in this example.

It is not obvious that when the method of neutral counting conflicts with a desire-weighted count, neutral counting invariably must win. Suppose that everything you are free to do, I am free to do, plus I am free to do one further thing. That further thing might be utterly trivial – a thumb-wiggling option, say. And our desires might be such that yours are fully satisfiable, mine overwhelmingly doomed to frustration, in our respective situations. As to whether in these conditions you have more or less freedom than I, ordinary usage seems to be indecisive. Nor do I see how these utterly different ways of regarding freedom might be combined into a coherent hybrid standard. One obstacle to the generation of a hybrid is that neutral counting, unlike the desire thesis, suffices only for ordinal judgments. Neutrally, one can sometimes judge that I have more freedom than you, but not how much more.

The main difficulty in stipulating that only neutral counting procedures determine the extent of a person's freedom is that straightaway we must acknowledge that there is hardly ever a reasonable basis for judging that a person in one situation enjoys more freedom than another person differently situated. If on the other hand we insist on a conception of freedom that admits of the ordinary comparisons that common sense sanctions, then there are two possibilities: either we measure freedom by reference to evaluative standards that rank some types of actions superior to others, or we measure freedom by a desire-weighted count of options, in which case we must agree after all that the contented slave may be more free than his discontented mate. Nowhere have objections against the former alternative been more forcefully urged than in Berlin's attack against Real Self theories of freedom. These theories involve ascribing to an agent purposes and goals of which the 'poor empirical self in space and time may know nothing' (133). The agent is deemed free or not according to whether these privileged goals are satisfiable – whether or not the agent wishes to satisfy them. 'Once I take this view,' Berlin writes, 'I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves ...' (133).

These words are in tension with Berlin's rejection of the desire thesis.

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Furthermore, reifying the 'real' self and ignoring the actual self is an error that the proponent of an evaluative ranking of action options for purposes of measuring freedom need not commit. To avoid this error all he need do is (1) acknowledge whatever frustration and suffering are occasioned by policies promoting options deemed objectively valuable and (2) refrain from ascribing to persons any inclination of their wills toward (supposedly) objectively valuable options in the absence of behavioral evidence that these inclinations exist.

It will be helpful to distinguish three possible views regarding the relationship between the evaluation of a person's available options and the extent of that person's freedom: (1) the amount of freedom a person has depends solely upon his subjective evaluation of the options he faces. (An evaluation is 'subjective' if it varies depending on the basic desires and preferences of the evaluator.) (2) The amount of freedom a person has depends on an objective evaluation of the options he faces, that is, an evaluation that is to some extent fixed independently of his basic desires and preferences. (3) The amount of freedom a person has does not in any way depend upon evaluation of the options he faces. Let's call (1) the Subjective view, (2) the Objective view, and (3) the Neutral view. The desire thesis registers a Subjective view, neutral counting represents the Neutral view. More needs to be said about the Objective view.

VII. The Attraction of the Objective View

The Objective view doubtless influences our intuitive response to some versions of the contrast between the contented and the discontented slave. The slave's available options are poor, and the contented slave is not free but benighted. If we imagine the slave contented because he is commanded to engage in a variety of objectively valuable activities and because he recognizes and appreciates their objective value, our conviction that the slave has little freedom begins to wobble.

The measurements registered by the Objective view can conflict with a subjective, desire-weighted counting and with neutral counting. If an objective evaluation assigns some option negative value,[20] then if a per-

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20 It might be thought that no plausible objective evaluation will assign negative values to any option, for the option if unwanted need not be taken. But this thought is mistaken. One might be tainted by considering an option. Or un-

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son's situation changes just by the addition of this option, the overall objective value of the person's option set declines, so if the amount of one's freedom varies directly with the total value of one's options, then this person now has less freedom. Neutral counting reverses this judgment, and the reversal is strengthened if the person subjectively places great value on the objectively valueless added option. One might try to resist the claim that neutral counting and the Objective view can conflict, by stipulating that all options have positive value, even if that value is miniscule. This stipulation strikes me as arbitrary and ad hoc, but let's accept it arguendo. Still, the objective value of one option might vary depending on what other options it is conjoined to, so that adding an option can reduce the value of the sum of the person's other options with the result that the addition of this option, itself of positive value, lowers the objective value of the total set of available options. Hence the stipulation does not eliminate potential conflict between the objective view and neutral counting.

That the Objective view can conflict with neutral counting so far leaves the former on a par with desire-weighted counting. An objection to both is not a reason to prefer either.

The extent of conflict between an objective measure of freedom on one side and desire-weighted and neutral methods of counting on the other side depends on the scope of the valuations thought to be objective. Somebody might hold that jazz is objectively superior to rock 'n' roll, and judo to wrestling, but deny that there is an objective ranking of the value of vacation sites, foods, types of ornamental apparel, and many other objects of choice. Another limit on the scope of objective valuation would be a refusal to countenance rankings across disparate categories of choice. Within the categories of music and combat-mimicking sports discriminations of value might be held possible, but to admit this is not to admit there is any sense to the question, which is better, jazz or karate.

Another ploy for reducing conflict between objective and desire-weighted standards of measuring freedom is to construe the desire thesis as an informed-desire thesis: the amount of freedom a person possesses varies directly with the extent to which his desires (or personal values) are satisfiable under the options available to him, and with the degree to which these desires are based upon full information and careful delibera-

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wanted options might clutter one's deliberations, as when there are too many competing brands of laundry soap.

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tion. If we make the plausible assumption that as people's desires come to be based upon increasingly full information, these desires will tend to converge toward conventional standards of objective value, then the full-information condition mutes the principled conflict between subjective and objective evaluation. This assumption might sound priggish and implausible, but all it really amounts to is the conjunction of two boring truths: (1) that people with similar education and knowledge, other things equal, will tend to agree in their value judgments to a greater degree than they agree with the value judgments of those with dissimilar education and knowledge, and (2) that the value judgments of those with greater education and knowledge tend to set the conventional standards. Nonetheless, this proposed reconciliation is largely spurious. To see why, distinguish conditional and unconditional basic desires. A conditional basic desire is a desire for something for its own sake, not as an instrument to any further purpose, given that some fact holds. An unconditional basic desire is just one that is not so conditioned.

Conditional basic desires are straightforwardly amenable to rational criticism. If I want X, on condition that Y is true, and you produce good evidence that Y is false, you have given me good reason not to want X.

Unconditional basic desires are another kettle of fish altogether. Doubtless the acquisition of knowledge and reflection upon it can and do induce change in one's unconditional basic desires. But in the absence of an account of how such information supplies reason to change one's desires, there is no ground for taking desires shaped by knowledge to be better desires. If I were to learn a lot about quantum physics, my worldview would predictably change and some of my unconditional desires along with it. Knowing this does not in itself supply me a rational motive to acquire knowledge, or to be suspicious of my current desires.

The full-information condition in its application to that portion of the desire thesis that pertains to unconditional basic desires simply reflects the subversion of the desire thesis by a purportedly objective evaluation: that desires based upon full knowledge and reflection are ipso facto inherently superior to spontaneous and ignorant desires. The reconciliation described three paragraphs back is not a mutual convergence but rather a one-sided surrender of part of the subjective view. The conflict remains.

The project of measuring freedom has degenerated into a three-cornered struggle between competing standards of measurement. To speak of 'the Objective view' as the occupant of one corner is misleading, for there are legions of purportedly objective standards of value. Conceding the premise that there is an objective standard of value, we are not

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thereby equipped with a standard to rank options for the purpose of measuring freedom until some standard is specified, and we face myriad competitor specifications and lack a procedure for non-arbitrarily picking out one of them. This is Mill's point when he writes, 'the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.'[21] I agree. But Mill's point is not an argument, or a conceptual insight, just a challenge to the defender of objective value to describe the standard she favors and to give good reason to prefer this standard over its competitors.

We started with a muddle and are ending with another. Progress, if any, has been from simple to complex muddle. The standards that we employ to measure freedom are irreducibly plural – even if we discard the Objective view – and these plural standards do not mesh smoothly. In those cases where these standards of measurement yield compatible answers, we can unequivocally assert there is more freedom here than there. In those cases where the standards conflict, the appeal to freedom will be argumentatively indecisive. My tentative conclusion is that judgments of comparative freedom are unable to bear the weight that is often placed on them in the strife of ideological debate. The idea of freedom is not a useful tool for doing fundamental work in political philosophy. If I am right, this tool is actually three separate instruments, loosely strapped together. Regarded separately, each has its problems. None furnishes an adequate solution to Berlin's puzzle about the contented slave.[22]

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21 J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 10, J.M. Robson, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1969), 234. For a counterargument, see Charles Taylor, 'The Diversity of Goods,' in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, 129-44.

22 I thank G.A. Cohen for criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

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