



Freedom and Sustainability

Libertad y sostenibilidad

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Abstract

This article examines the perceived conflict between freedom and sustainability, proposing that a qualitative understanding of freedom can integrate liberal and ecological interests. It critiques the notion of quantitative freedom, focused on maximizing individual choices without considering their content or purpose, for ignoring essential aspects such as the rights of future generations and ecological sustainability. In contrast, it argues that qualitative freedom, which values options based on their contribution to human autonomy and dignity, offers a more comprehensive solution. This perspective prioritizes options that promote the freedom of all, including future generations, and suggests that some restrictions may be necessary to enhance sustainable life opportunities. The conclusion asserts that qualitative freedom should precede the quantitative consideration of options, allowing sustainability policies to be viewed not as limitations on freedom but as qualitative improvements that ensure better opportunities for all, both now and in the future.

Keywords: *freedom, sustainability, qualitative freedom, ecological interests, future generations.*

Resumen

Este artículo examina el conflicto percibido entre libertad y sostenibilidad, proponiendo que una comprensión cualitativa de la libertad puede integrar intereses liberales y ecológicos. Se critica la

noción de libertad cuantitativa, centrada en maximizar opciones individuales sin considerar su contenido o propósito, por ignorar aspectos esenciales como los derechos de futuras generaciones y la sostenibilidad ecológica. En contraste, se argumenta que la libertad cualitativa, que valora opciones en función de su contribución a la autonomía y dignidad humanas, ofrece una solución más integral. Esta perspectiva prioriza opciones que promuevan la libertad de todos, incluyendo futuras generaciones, y sugiere que algunas restricciones pueden ser necesarias para mejorar las oportunidades de vida sostenibles. Se concluye que la libertad cualitativa debe preceder la consideración cuantitativa de opciones, permitiendo ver las políticas de sostenibilidad no como limitaciones de la libertad, sino como mejoras cualitativas que garantizan mejores oportunidades para todos, ahora y en el futuro.

Palabras clave: *libertad, sostenibilidad, libertad cualitativa, intereses ecológicos, generaciones futuras.*

1. Introduction

Many people sense a conflict between freedom and sustainability. At first glance, this is hardly surprising. Those who strive for ecological sustainability impose obligations on themselves, do not avail themselves of certain options and, conversely, commit themselves to others. All of which noticeably restricts the scope of personal choice – for instance, in consumer behaviour. It seems that if you want more sustainability, you must make do with less freedom – or *vice versa*.

One can try to resolve this conflict from both sides: *Either* one can explain why certain forms of ecological precaution do not, in fact, reduce our personal, economic, and political freedom, but rather preserve and sometimes even increase it; for example, through business practices and political strategies that successfully exploit win-win potentials between ecology and economy or through lifestyles that promise higher personal fulfillment by concentrating on the essentials. *Alternatively*, the conflict can be defused from the perspective of freedom, by demonstrating that and how the idea of freedom does not necessarily collide with sustainability strategies but often rather culminates in them.

In this article, I pursue the latter strategy. I first discuss – and criticize – a conception of *quantitative* freedom underlying most neoliberal and libertarian theories. As theories of quantitative freedom aim at maximizing individual options according to the motto "the more, the better," they tend to raise extant tensions between freedom and sustainability policies to the level of an apparent conflict of principles (2). In contrast, I aim to show next, how an idea of *qualitative* freedom allows for an integration of liberal and ecological interests (3). Finally, I summarize central considerations in a brief concluding section (4).

2. Quantitative Freedom

In the 20th century, especially in Anglo-American philosophy, a positivist approach to the theory of freedom was popular, limiting the notion of freedom to phenomena that can be observed with the five senses. The forefather of such approaches is Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) with his concept of liberty that comes down to physical freedom of movement. Hobbes stated, "By LIBERTY, is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments: [...]" (Hobbes, 1996). Water, Hobbes added, "kept in by banks, or vessels" (ibid.) is not (anymore) free; water that flows unimpeded, on the other hand, is. Freedom is not analyzed internally, in terms of its content or purpose, but merely defined externally, by an absence of physical influence and coercion (Hobbes, 1996).

Conversely, a person who acts in delusion or under the influence of drugs, while remaining physically unfettered, is to be regarded as *free*. Hobbes explicitly confirmed this reading; he did not want liberty to be understood as freedom of the mind (for example, to emancipate oneself from addiction or delusion). Expressly, he defined "liberty in the proper sense" as "corporal liberty; that is to say, freedom from chains, and imprisonment, [...]". Accordingly, the laws of society are inevitably perceived as "artificial chains" (Hobbes, 1996); freedom can only exist in spheres not (yet) regulated by laws. The less one is constrained by any such regulations, the freer one is. Freedom, understood in this way, means *freedom from* restrictions; it is defined *negatively* by their absence - and *quantitatively*: the fewer limits, the more freedom; and the more such freedom, the better.

The hoped-for gain of this undertaking is a value-free, purely *descriptive* concept of freedom, which marks out the permissible linguistic field in advance, to be plowed later which questions of a *normative* nature - who owes whom the (re-)establishment of which freedoms, and how.

In defining the limits of that type of freedom, today many follow Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) rather than Hobbes. For Hobbes still included into his conception of the negations of liberty *natural* obstacles and constraints, whereas Bentham reduced his account to *social* processes, i.e., to ones for which *other people* are causally responsible. In Bentham's example: "You and your neighbor, suppose, are at variance: he has bound you hand and foot, or has fastened you to a tree: in this case you are certainly not at liberty as against him: on the contrary he has deprived you of your liberty [...]" (Oppenheim, 1985, p. 309). On average, Bentham thought, such arbitrary violence creates less benefit for the perpetrators than it costs the victims. The legislature, as the neutral custodian of the quantitative liberty of all, should thus use its regulatory power to "cut off on the one side or the other a portion of the subject's liberty" (Oppenheim, 1985, p. 309) to maximize the overall amount of liberty. For if everyone simply moved about as they pleased, collisions would occur. Hence, coordination rules must be enforced, which (by restricting individual freedom here and there) increase the total amount of freedom (and thus, on average, individual freedom).

To come to this conclusion, no moral *reasoning* is needed; calculating *rationality* suffices (Bentham, 1970). The required system of rules is presented as a set of laws which can be detached from the – qualitative, value-bound – discourse about the good life. Everyone, it is said, regardless of their moral commitments or religious convictions, could agree to these rules based merely on a clever – quantitative, value-free – calculation of their own advantage, or ‘option space’ (Button, 2008).

At first glance, its apparent independence from potentially conflictive normative specifications recommends the quantitative conception of freedom for culturally diverse societies and a progressively globalizing world (Friedman & Friedman, 1990). Yet, all is not well. The quantitative model relegates every aspect of life that does not fit in well with the logic of a quantitative increase in individual agency to the private sector. Regard for the natural environs as

well as for posterity appear at best marginally in theories of quantitative freedom: All such aspects of nature that cannot be readily instrumentalized, tend to fall out of purview. And this has systematic reasons.

The theory of quantitative freedom is oriented at a model of a rational exchange or barter. Once, however, respecting others is conceived as *negation* (i.e., restriction) of one's options, one will assent only when receiving something in return: normally a similar respect on part of the others. This holds not only for duties of omission but also for those of action. One supports others, insofar as these can be obliged to an equal or, if different, to a quantitatively equivalent support; otherwise not. Where no symmetrical exchange takes place – e.g., in the relations between humans and animals –, this logic breaks down. For what is the point – from the angle of a rational self-interest maximizer – of committing to certain forms of self-restraint or assistance if one gives more than one receives? Obviously, such an approach poses for immense problems for integrating the rights of future generations and concerns for ecological sustainability into the philosophy of freedom.

At bottom, the narrowness of quantitative freedom theories results from their desire to separate sharply "freedom as normative condition and freedom as physical fact" from each other, i.e., to separate physical freedom, based on "modal categories of possibility and impossibility", from normative questions, oriented on "deontic categories of permissibility and impermissibility" (Kramer, 2003, p. 59). But is it possible to give a physicalist account of a basic stock of liberties without any normative implications? Is the quantitative conception of freedom truly the key to making freedom interpersonally and interculturably comparable and distributable? Can we simply measure, count, and calculate freedoms? (Megone, 1987).

Doubts are warranted. If freedom really consisted only in moving one's own limbs as one saw fit, how shall we explain the moral pathos with which political and philosophical discussions about freedom are conducted? Why, also, do people cling desperately to certain freedoms, while relaxedly renouncing others? (O'Neill, 1989). This goes to show: If we separate completely from the idea of freedom the question of what makes opportunities (more or less) valuable, then we *subjectivize* something that *objectively* belongs to the issue at stake. Yet, where *qualitative* and

normative aspects are essential, a restriction to solely *quantitative* and *descriptive* judgments sacrifices truth on the altar of method (Connolly, 1993).

In recent decades, ever more philosophers have realized this point and moved away from a definition of freedom based purely on tangible components. In recourse to everyday notions of freedom and their linguistic reflections, intangible dimensions are increasingly readmitted, such as moral and aesthetic aspects of freedom. Welcome though it is that today philosophers readmit and examine the richer framework of meaning embedded in our everyday parlance about, – does this suffice? The linguistic-analytical approach dispenses, after all, with any interpretation of the idea of freedom that goes beyond the *factual* customs of given linguistic communities. This limit makes it difficult to address *counterfactual* aspects, for instance, when the idea of freedom confronts us as a normative call to *change* dominant modes of speech and action. For this reason, we need to ask even more fundamentally: Is it meaningful to tie freedom only (*extensionally*) to its semantic or other manifestations? Do we not also have to probe the idea of freedom (*intensionally*) for meanings that might transcend its present and past embodiments? The image of freedom, detached from its inner meaning in a purely externalist perspective, is at best the imprint of freedom's worldly reifications, not its archetype. As a result, we might unintentionally take a distorted picture of freedom for its genuine image and, consequently but tragically, reduce freedom to (nothing but) a set of available options.

What results is a – in this model: unavoidable – competition between free individual agency and interpersonal coordination. The relationship between law and liberty appears accordingly as a tragic conflict between liberty and order. One seems to be confronted with the awkward choice of either increasing the scope of individual freedom of individuals or of state action. *Tertium non datur*. What thus falls by the wayside is the possibility that individual and collective freedom can mutually integrate and strengthen each other. This conceptual loss is caused by the conventional – geometric and arithmetic – schemas of the category of quantity. Geometrically speaking: Where one body occupies a given space, no other can do it at the same time. Arithmetically, the same holds: Society, when conceived in the quantitative terms of game theory or contractualism, results from a thought experiment in which individuals try to maximize their own freedoms while

minimizing the interference of others. The crux, then, of a purely quantitative approach to the issue of freedom is to perceive all societal balancing of freedoms as a zero-sum game where gains in freedom on one side must entail losses of freedom on another.

According to the quantitative logic, individuals accept the state and its rules only insofar as they foresee to gain more from legally ordered relationships than within anarchic constellations. What individuals receive from their hypothetical exchange of rights and duties must be at least equivalent to what they put in. And right there – in this demand for symmetry in reciprocation – lies the rub: What about people who are not capable to either benefit – or harm – others enough to make cooperation with them seem advantageous? Consider future generations. They can neither benefit nor harm us. How are they to be integrated into the social contract? (Nussbaum, 2013). According to a merely quantitative logic, social cooperation, let alone assistance, cannot be construed in cases of a stark asymmetry of input and output. Measures to protect the environment which neither benefit the generation taking them upon itself nor its immediate descendants, can hardly be justified within this logic.

Hence, if sustainability is what we are after, instead of simply quantifying options we must create room for qualitative differentiations. Some freedoms *are* more important than others. Once we follow that intuition, we must question the foundations of the quantitative theories of freedom that are so oblivious of this elementary but essential insight. Looking solely at the *number* of realizable preferences means overlooking that freedom also, and quite essentially, consists in the normative reflection, critique, and modification of the *nature* of our preferences. A very few (second order) preferences can critically evaluate and transform countless (first order) preferences, after all; for example, when a few moral maxims keep countless hedonistic desires in check. Would our freedom be helped if, because of the higher quantity of the latter, we relinquished the former? Are the freest of people those whose ability for critical reflection and self-control is sabotaged?

We can do without the shrill thought experiments (hallucination machines, happiness drugs, parallel existences, etc.) that populate philosophical treatises that illustrate this objection. Let us simply, and more realistically, imagine a society that holds public media and education in low esteem and largely leaves the shaping of minds and tastes to private providers with keen business

interests. The upshot may well be citizens who, trained by commercial manipulation, squander their life in a shopping frenzy and in the safe conformity of manufactured consent, reliably vote for politicians devoted to the constant expansion of consumer options, regardless of what this does to the social or natural fabric of their lifeworld. According to the quantitative understanding of freedom, these people would have to be considered freer than citizens of other societies who, say, autonomously informed and educated (*plus I*), would have agreed on sustainability policies resulting in overall somewhat fewer purchase options (*minus n+I*) to choose from (Dworkin, 1988).

Apart from such practical considerations, we should oppose the absolutization of freedom of (commercial) choice also in the name of freedom itself. Not just based on the ubiquitous experience that we occasionally find a tad fewer options quite agreeable, when, say, in front of overflowing supermarket shelves a longing for "freedom from decision" creeps up on us (Quine, 1987). No, we should rather on principle refuse to reduce freedom to freedom of choice and oppose its conceptualization as a countable commodity (Dworkin, 1977).

That quantitative approaches reify freedom into a commodity is, to be very clear, no polemic. Apologists of quantitative approaches proudly declare: While freedom *appears* as an end-in-itself, it *is* only a means to ends. Certainly, they aver, freedom is not a *concrete means* (to predefined ends). But, in their view, it forever remains an *abstract instrument*. Like money, they regard freedom as an *all-purpose means* without decreasing marginal utility. This is why, the quantitative argument goes on, many people mistakenly consider freedom to be intrinsically *more valuable* than the goods it provides. In fact, however, its value would be quite as *extrinsic* as what it helps attain; yet quantitatively incomparably *greater*, since this commodity called 'freedom,' being entirely abstract, can also refer to still undetermined future uses (Carter, 1999).

Equating freedom with money turns liberty into a fetish, however: To budget the commodity value of freedom one has to make all kinds of freedoms as commensurable as money – by reducing them to nothing but countable options. As a consequence, we are to think of the entire world, including ourselves and our freedoms, in purely mechanical terms: "we need to think of space and time as granular in order to produce measurements of 'the extensiveness of available

action' (Carter, 1999). Only then could all (otherwise disturbing) qualitative aspects and value judgments be completely reduced to quantitatively determinable space-time relations.

What a vicious circle! First, freedom is considered in quantitative terms alone. Then its commensurability is inferred, and its physical measurability postulated. The latter requires a mechanistic view of the world as well as of ourselves. This in turn thwarts any qualitative distinctions, all of which are thus reduced to differences in quantity. Pretending to be value-neutral, the theory of quantitative freedom is anything but. By limiting itself to what can be counted empirically, it makes a hidden, yet stark judgment: against any aspects of freedom that cannot be measured in this way, regardless of their relevance.

For instance, this logic suggests that only causal effects may be considered as barriers to freedom, not however omissions of assistance, which, though, may be just as indispensable for establishing the freedom of others (Miller, 1985). This goes to show that *questions of value* belong to the factuality of freedom: We cannot define what constitutes a violation of freedom before we have agreed on our duties towards each other. Without a clear answer to this question, the radius of individual freedoms cannot be delimited, and we cannot indicate what we can legitimately defend against others and what we are entitled to demand from them, or they from us (Kristjánsson, 1996). *Normativity belongs to the facticity of freedom* (Flathman, 1987).

Put differently, whoever examines a phenomenon of the humanities and social sciences solely with the quantitative-scientific methods germane to the natural sciences must reckon with the fact that aspects beyond the material-physical realm will fail to register in the analysis; with harsh practical consequences: Quantitative theories of freedom protect freedoms that one already (factually) has but are less sensitive to (counterfactual) freedoms to which one might nonetheless have a moral right. Oriented (*extensionally*) to freedom in its material form - self-disposal over one's own body and possessions –, not (*intensionally*) to its conceptual ideal, they do not aim to optimize concrete life chances, but maximize abstract options – embodied in enforceable property rights. Under the aegis of such theories, the political community shrinks into an entitlement insurance, which, instead of enabling freedom in all directions, forms on behalf of, and solely commits itself to, the reciprocal protection of assets and claims (Laski, 1962).

Aspirations to ecological sustainability are, in this logic, perceived as a threat to the maximization of individual options: Where freedom is regarded merely as a physical, given capacity, the social, cultural, and legal construction of freedom is lost from view. Fellow human beings, let alone animals, register mostly as potential interferers with one's naturally given freedom (Marx & Engels, 1988) and the quantitative framework suggests: the less private freedom is influenced, the better. Freedom is equated with sovereign independence, and any political regulation or social co-determination of individual freedom will, from this angle, be resented as a potential negation of one's liberties. Hence the concept of a minimal state, the 'night watchman state,' still enjoys great popularity among defenders of quantitative freedom.

Quantitatively thought, such results are eerily coherent: For what could be the rationale for catering to people from whom one cannot expect equivalent advantages or disadvantages? Measures in favor of solidarity or environmental protection, where they do bring tangible benefits or their neglect goes along with negative repercussions, should stop at national borders. Quantitative freedom theories thus marginalize a vast swath of global and intergenerational concerns for ecological sustainability. Only where such considerations prove profitable can they be integrated into quantitative freedom theories. Yet, all ecological problems whose solution does not readily pay off via increased individual options cannot be addressed within this matrix. For their solution, we must consider not only the number but also the nature of our options – and, accordingly, interpret freedom not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

3. Qualitative Freedom

Freedom cannot, we saw, be analyzed in an entirely value-neutral way. While this is being increasingly recognized today (Lindner, 2009), the admission of this fact occurs often by the by, as a small concession within a still predominantly quantitative framework of analysis; typically, in the following vein: Qualitative aspects, surely, have their due place in the form of diverse private lifestyles, that is, within spaces established and defended by policies of quantitative freedom. But that won't do. *Multiplicity* is a quantitative concept. *Diversity*, however, aims at *significant differences* within multiplicity, at a *qualitatively structured* quantity.

Consider the relationship between public and private transport. In the U.S., for example, every commuter usually can pick between countless brands and types of cars. We can reformulate this choice as a prototypical instance of quantitative freedom. Insofar as the car market in the U.S. offers much more brands and models than in Europe, the sheer quantity of options for private transport is greater. Qualitatively (regarding *significant difference* within multiplicity), though, said choice seems quite limited. In many places, the qualitative alternative of taking a bicycle to work, or a train, or a tram, is not available due to the lack of safe bicycle lanes or efficient public transportation. Not infrequently, after all, the only connection between two towns is a *highway*. An ecologically sustainable form of transport will make your commute often twice or thrice as long in the US. This goes to show: Whoever wants a real diversity of living conditions, is after qualitative freedom. Only qualitative differences turn a pale multitude into colorful diversity.

But *which* opportunities are worth protecting in the name of qualitative freedom? All options? Even destructive ones? Decisions must be made (Christman, 2005). But how? In quantitative thinking, as we saw, one must always decide between competing freedoms according to what creates a higher total number of options, now and in the aftermath. It is an *absolute* measurement between options based on their supposed consequences. A different path is offered by a *qualitative* orientation. Qualitative freedom theory achieves its concretization by way of a self-iteration and self-application of the principle of liberty: Its motto is not “the more, the better” but rather “the better, the more”. The better a freedom is – the more clearly an individual freedom realizes the universal idea of freedom, the better it meshes with the freedom of all persons, here and now as well as there and then – the more we should prefer it to alternative options. Qualitative freedom theory, recommends giving preference to options that promote the autonomy of all people (including future generations) –, and so screens our options for such that respect human dignity, advance life chances, enhance capabilities, and so on (Nussbaum, 2013).

Relative rankings are sufficient to make such comparisons. One does not have to *weigh* the freedom of certain options to the gram when *weighting* the preferability of different options. For example, we can reasonably say that the freedom to express a certain opinion is more important than the freedom to drive on a certain side of the highway, without measuring by *how much exactly*

the first option matters more. Expressed in econometric terms, while quantitative freedom theory requires *cardinal* scales with *commensurable* measures, for qualitative freedom theory *ordinal* rankings suffice to compare even *incommensurable* goods.

Although theories of quantitative freedom explicitly reject qualitative considerations, they cannot function without implicitly borrowing from them (you can only count the quantitative number of something whose qualitative nature you have already settled upon). Their accurate reconstruction is therefore equivalent to their deconstruction – i.e., their dialectical transfer into the category of quality. Conversely, the idea of qualitative freedom is from the outset oriented towards the integration of the quantitative dimension. Qualitative value wants to bring quantitative measurement to bear appropriately, not to replace it. While quantitative thinking negates and externalizes all qualitative demands, conversely the quantitative dimension is affirmed and integrated by the qualitative approach. The idea of qualitative freedom thus proves to be more capable of integration and therefore enjoys categorical priority.

This theoretical difference has important practical consequences. For defenders of quantitative freedom, any increase in private options – for example, through an expansion of markets – is to be approved *per se*, whereas a theory of qualitative can judge in a more differentiated way and reflect also upon the nature of those options (including their opportunity costs): mass is not class, which is why freedom should not simply be equated with freedom of choice (MacGilvray, 2011). While quantitative freedom theories usually paint the market as a heaven of economic freedom, because by definition it is but a place and aggregate of voluntary – i.e., ‘free’ – acts of exchange (Thrasher, 2014), the theory of qualitative freedom takes a more earthly approach. It asks about the quality of the transactions in question: Was necessity involved or manipulation? (Ameson, 2009). Are market-based transactions acceptable even if they undermine human dignity? (Nussbaum, 2013). What about immoral and dishonorable transactions? What about agreements at the expense of third parties, for example at the expense of future generations?

Based on such reflections, qualitative freedom will not simply endorse any augmentation of options whatsoever and, consequently, will not define economic success purely in terms of quantitative growth. Rather, a balance must be found *between* freedoms: between economic

freedom on the one hand and political, social, cultural, and ecological freedoms on the other, certainly. But, also, between the economic freedom of these and those citizens, as well as between different forms of economic freedom, for example, between short-term or long-term oriented economic strategies, or between economic objectives of varying degrees of socio-ecologically sustainability. In other words, contrary to conventional wisdom, the fight against rigid economic maximization tendencies is not a battle between freedom and its opposites, but between different forms of freedom (Dierksmeier, 2016).

Case in point: the global and intertemporal responsibility of freedom. Freedom is *per se* not a local or national but a global idea, not excluding anyone; consequently, race, gender, and religion are irrelevant for the validity of the demand for freedom; and, I would add, we should treat temporal and spatial distance likewise. If *we* are entitled to freedom as *persons*, so are *all* persons. The citizens of distant countries, as well as the members of future generations, have a human right to conditions that enable a free life, just like people with whom we already communicate, cooperate, or trade. Qualitative freedom theory thus extends, not only the prohibition of harm but also the duty to empower people to lead autonomous lives, to asymmetrical, for example, to global and intertemporal relations. In other words, the freedom of others, besides defining the *limits* of ours, also determines one of its most notable *goals*. A qualitative idea of freedom calls for emancipation, empowerment, and capability enhancement (Dierksmeier, 2019).

Since neither the market nor nature ensure that everyone can lead an autonomous life, the demand for individual freedom and the promotion of its general preconditions must go hand in hand. What should be defended, from the perspective of qualitative freedom, is not only the *status quo* of secured freedoms and held possessions but equally everyone's *claim* to basic rights and property. Personal property facilitates one's active participation in the world; and such participation is a human right. As long as only one human being is in economic bondage, the freedom of all others remains imperfect.

Quantitative freedom theories want to maximize self-determination and minimize regulation; the idea of qualitative freedom, instead, aims at optimizing self-determination through social co-determination. It views others as *spheres* of, rather than as *barriers* to, individual freedom.

It interprets the webs of societal coordination as a eulogy upon socially mediated autonomy rather than as an elegy upon inescapable heteronomy.

Our present socioeconomic realities, being the historical outcome of reiterated interactions of individual and institutional freedoms, owe their existence in no small part to the *theories* that shaped these freedoms. Hence, we should not merely concentrate on distributional conflicts between *factual* freedoms. *Counterfactual* considerations must also take place. When asking which *alternative freedoms* are prevented by the current *economic and political status quo*, we should also question which *alternative conceptions of freedom* were and still are hindered by the *intellectual status quo* buttressing the former.

The idea of qualitative freedom instructs, beyond preserving acquired rights and options, to create new and better opportunities. At the same time and for the same reason, a qualitative understanding of freedom, may well affirm some restrictions of individual options – as voluntary qualifications of personal or institutional liberties. The social, ecological, and cultural contexts, for example, that shape our capacity for autonomy, for self-criticism and self-control, appear, in this lens, as apt subjects of freedom-conducive regulations (Dworkin, 1988). Whereas the model of quantitative freedom prizes a liberty that can isolate itself from its contexts as it sees fit, striving to become as independent from them as it is indifferent about them, the perspective of qualitative freedom emphasizes autonomy within and through relations of interdependency. In the stead of a quantitative equation (less dependence = more freedom), a qualitatively oriented theory of freedom peruses *which* forms of social, cultural, and ecological interdependence best promote autonomy. Some such frameworks may be found, indeed, to curtail our arbitrary choice or physical leeway while enabling freedom, insofar as they nurture the environment and the civilization our liberties depend upon.

But doesn't this expansion of concerns obscure or overburden the idea of freedom? From a quantitative point of view, i.e., under the objective of achieving a maximum of private options, this does seem to be the case. The theory of qualitative freedom, however, links individual freedom from the outset to the freedom of all (Dierksmeier, 2018). Burdens and limits that serve this universal purpose do not appear (as in the quantitative calculus) as negations of freedom. Rather,

they are affirmed (qualitatively) as a realization of the universalist essence of the idea of freedom. Demands for ecological responsibility register thus not automatically as threatening *negative limitations* of freedom, but have to be examined whether and to what extent they may rather constitute *positive determinations* of individual on behalf of universal freedom. Often, the options given up in each such case are outweighed – qualitatively – by the alternative opportunities gained, for instance with a view to the sustainability of personal autonomy for generations to come.

Society has always privileged certain forms of freedom, subordinating, for instance, the freedom to destroy to the freedom to create or the freedom to preserve; and with good reason: Human freedom does not survive without intact biological and cultural environments. All must act so that everyone can be free, whether in the defense of private but socially responsible property as a basis for truly autonomous market exchanges and participation in society, or in the commitment to the protection of the natural foundations of life, for example, to enable the freedom of future generations.

The idea of qualitative freedom makes claims on the individual *and* the community: to free oneself from self-inflicted dependence remains everyone's own responsibility. The liberation from outwardly imposed dependence, however, we owe one another. We should, consequently, regard society not as a contract for the mutual assurance of what we own and have, but as a covenant for the mutual enabling of what we can be and become. Freedom, that is to say, requires, not only the *absence* of violations, but also the *presence* of conditions: social security systems that empower and enable everyone's autonomous participation in society, for instance, or effective environmental protection.

What emanates from our personal freedom ultimately reenters its ambit. So does freedom impact the conditions under which it operates. Because freedom is relational, looking after our social and ecological environs is, against conventional misunderstandings, a genuinely liberal concern. Overall, qualitatively oriented freedom theory advises economic and ecological caution. Precisely because the philosophy of freedom does not prescribe certain lifestyles to anyone, it must, in view of finite resources and infinite conceivable human goals, call for the careful use of our shared resources so that future generations can likewise decide about how they want to live in freedom.

Quantitative thinking about freedom, by contrast, lacks a sensorium for such considerations, as in its logic more options must *everywhere* and *always* be considered preferable (Flathman, 1987). Where social or ecological agendas oppose this imperative of maximization by eliminating certain options, friction occurs. Qualitative freedom theory, instead, is premised on evaluating different forms of freedom according to whether and how they protect or, better yet, enhance the freedoms of others. From this latter perspective, then, it is clear how sustainability efforts may well be affirmed as a manifestation, not negation, of liberty.

Mapping out the concrete political consequences of this philosophical of qualitative freedom is not incumbent on philosophy itself. For we must distinguish the multiplicity of *programs* and *concepts* of qualitative freedom (*which* opportunities and capabilities a community values and protects preferentially) from the mere *idea* of qualitative freedom (*that* such a qualification between options is at all made). The distinction must at all times be maintained between the contribution of *philosophers* to the one *idea* of freedom and the various *concepts* - conceptions and programs - of freedom developed discursively by *citizens*.

What philosophy can assert, however, is the intent to marry structural equality with substantial diversity in the implementation of the *idea* of qualitative freedom. The eventuating concepts of freedom must allow for *unity in principle* and *plurality in practice*. The political concretization of the idea of freedom must do justice to its self-iterative idea: a liberal idea of freedom demands liberal procedures for its specification. Only procedures that are open to the participation of all concerned meet this demand. Consequently, there cannot be a "one size fits all"-approach. Instead, every society must decide for itself what kind of legal protection, which life chances and support it wants to grant its citizens, and it must also autonomously select the procedures for such decisions. The theory of qualitative freedom does not ask technocratically: "Who is right?" but democratically: "Who has the right to decide?".

Decision-making procedures that discriminate against individuals and groups and prevent minorities from being protected today in such a way that they can become majorities tomorrow are inadmissible. The means of liberal politics should always correspond to its end. Substantive and procedural freedom belong inexorably together. Individuals or institutions implementing freedom

in such a way that, if the roles were reversed, no freedom would remain for them, contradict themselves and thus undermine the validity of their own claims. Only such a concept of freedom can be considered as a true translation of the idea of qualitative freedom, which survives its critical self-application.

Freedom always means the freedom of those who live and choose differently. A use of freedom that creates path dependencies that are difficult to reverse is therefore under a higher burden of justification than one whose effect is easily reversible. In terms of economic policy, for example, we have long recognized a selfsame notion: Anyone who uses a temporary monopoly to prevent others from gaining market access is impermissibly using his or her freedom to prevent the economic freedom of others – and thus the state has to act as a corrective, protecting the economic freedoms of others. The same should hold ecologically: Whoever ruins an ecosystem excludes not only countless other liberal uses of the same habitat at present, but also in the future. Surely, such actions cannot be equated with actions that are neutral or even favorable to the (present and future) freedoms of others.

The idea of qualitative freedom invites us to mediate the concerns of individual as well as social freedoms in such a way that all can live in freedom. As such, it leads our thinking to the concept of democracy – and qualifies it at once. Democracy is not an end-in-itself but a means to secure freedom through providing procedures by which those affected by certain decisions can be involved in their making. It has to accomplish no less, but also no more, than the joint processing of shared problems, where possible on the basis of participation and, where impossible, by way of political representation: A host of ways and procedures – civic deliberation, direct democracy, public dialogues, planning cells, citizens' forums, surveys, mediation procedures, etc. – may be selected to accomplish this goal (Fuhrmann, 1999). There is still a large research gap regarding which of these forms are the most suitable for which political, economic, and social concerns - especially in view of the increasing globalization and virtualization of our lifeworld and the resulting problems of appropriate co-determination across large spatial and temporal distances. What is clear, however, is that the forms of freedom politics must adapt to the times (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010). Understanding democracy with Habermas as "self-determination of humankind" (Habermas,

1961), the progressive spatial and temporal dispersion of our actions entails: Where problems overtax the regulatory capacities of national law, answers must be sought also at the regional and global level (Briggs, 2008). Likewise: If today's decisions can ruin tomorrow's freedoms, we must incorporate the rights and interests of future generations into our current decision-making processes.

4. Conclusions

Quantitative freedom theory focuses on the highest possible *number* or the greatest possible *expansion* of individual choices. The idea of qualitative freedom, to the contrary, wants to sensitize us to the necessary *evaluation, creation, and modification* of those possibilities: some we should particularly promote, others less so. While *quantitative* freedom is concerned with *how much freedom* is granted to individuals, *qualitative freedom* is concerned with *which* freedoms we grant each other and *whose* freedom we enable. The main thesis of this essay is that the idea of qualitative freedom must precede a quantitative consideration of our options: First comes the *qualitative weighting*; only then, according to the criteria thus gained, the *quantitative weighing* of competing opportunities. Rightly understood, the dimension of quantitative freedom results only from the idea of qualitative freedom and is dialectically subordinated to it: *Quantitative freedom finds its ground in qualitative freedom; qualitative freedom gives itself its measure in quantitative freedom.*

By prioritizing the internal qualification of our freedoms in terms of their compatibility with the freedoms of all others – including future generations – sustainability concerns become visible as integral moments of a liberal way of life, a freedom-based economic order and an open society. Instead of chalking sustainability policies up quantitatively as a *minus* in liberty, we should view and treat the effort to shape our use of freedom sustainably as a qualitative *melior* – an improvement – in our and future life chances. Ensuring the ecological sustainability of our increasingly globalized use of liberty does not reduce the idea of freedom but manifests its universalist essence. Through whatever procedures the world community concretizes this notion, the selection of appropriate means and measures must result from a cosmopolitan angle. Instead of

a world of quantitatively maximized possibilities for but a few, the idea of qualitative freedom strives for a world of better opportunities for all.

5. References

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