Rethinking Freedom for Contemporary Psychology

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to rethink the topic of freedom for contemporary psychology. Freedom, within psychological research today, is a neglected, even slightly old-fashioned term. In this paper, we explore the practical, normative, and political dimensions of freedom as a psychological concept. We begin by tracing out key understandings of freedom from political theory, before discussing how thinkers such as Skinner, Maslow, Fromm, and May understood the different dimensions of freedom. We then discuss a governmental perspective on freedom, drawn from the work of Nikolas Rose, before finally turning to the sociocultural psychology of L. S. Vygotsky.

We contend that freedom is not merely the absence of constraints but a complex interplay between agency, responsibility, and social connections. Our paper argues that the modern emphasis on negative freedom, characterized by reduced interference and obligations, has resulted in a paradoxical situation where individuals feel overwhelmed and seek escape from freedom. By revisiting the insights of Erich Fromm and other scholars, we emphasize the need for positive freedom, which involves voluntary connections with others and active participation in shaping society. We argue that psychology's mandate should be to facilitate the exploration of alternative avenues that lead to flourishing and self-actualization.

Introduction

How should we think, psychologically, about freedom? This question was, once, much more central to psychology than it is today. Thus, in the middle of the 20th century, in the aftermath of the second World War, the psychological sciences were occupied with several explicitly political themes. Milgram's experiments on obedience, Zimbardo's infamous 'Stanford prison experiment,' the field of bystander studies, or even B.F. Skinner's radical behaviorism, to mention just a few. In existentialist and humanistic psychology, which also proliferated after the second World War, freedom too was a central turning point. Existential psychologists drew heavily on continental philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Simone De Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, or Martin Heidegger, for whom freedom was a significant topic. For example, the social psychologist and scholar Erich Fromm, whose work we return to later in the paper, wrote at length on freedom, its role in society and psychological development, and lamented that "we" did not know what "to do" with freedom (Fromm, 2020a). Across both this experimental research and the more philosophically based theoretical work, psychologists were deeply concerned with questions of politics, society, the social order and, crucially, the undue influence that people might exert over each other. Freedom, here, was both

an explicit and implicit concern, but always situated within an understanding of the practical, situated aspects of human psychology. This differed substantially from an older strand of thinking about freedom, namely that of *free will* and determinism, which also preoccupied psychologists as early as, for example, William James (see Viney, 1986, for a discussion). But if the concern with free will has lived on, today instantiated in contemporary neurosciences and 'neurophilosophy' (Libet, 1999), the interest in freedom as a political, practical, normative, and situated aspect of human existence has diminished significantly.

There is today a dearth of interest within psychology in the further development and understanding of freedom within a psychological framework that explicitly takes its practical, normative, and political aspects into consideration. It is slightly ironic that we must look outside of the discipline of psychology to find someone who has taken the approach of critically analyzing the fundamental question about how psychology has contributed, in a practical sense, to peoples' ability to act freely. It has long been argued by the sociologist Nikolas Rose (1996; 1999a; 1999b) that *psychology* and related psy-disciplines have been a significant part of the constitution of modern society and governance. As such, psychological techniques and technologies have been a central part in shaping the modern subject as fundamentally free, and unfree (Kvale, 2003).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide a psychological account of freedom today. We see freedom here as a situated (May, 1994), lived, bodily endeavor, as something which one can lose, be deprived of, or gain. Situated freedom is therefore not dependent on a metaphysical free will; but rather is lived *in the world*, dependent on social life, politics, and so forth (Sartre, 1963).

To provide such an account, the paper proceeds by delineating how the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished between negative and positive freedom. Secondly, we discuss the work of humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, both hugely influential, and both with significant and wide-ranging ideas about freedom as linked to self-actualization and so-called authentic personal development. We contrast this work, briefly, with that of another influential 20th century psychologist, namely B. F. Skinner, whose ideas about freedom were hugely controversial during his lifetime. Thirdly, we draw on the work of the sociologist Nikolas Rose, who has argued that psychology – as a discipline – has been significantly entangled in the constitution of "advanced liberalism" in the 20th century. For Rose, we show, psychology has been a significant factor in the *making* of freedom and free subjects. Fourth, having surveyed these three perspectives on freedom, we argue that they are also fundamentally unsatisfactory. Either they prioritize a self-centered picture of freedom (as in humanistic psychology), completely dismiss it (as in behaviorism) or fashion it into a question of government (as in Rose's analyses). What these analyses do not capture, we argue, is how the *experience* of freedom arises as a fundamental concept that governs how we think and act *in* the world. People struggle against oppression, narrate their lives as based upon choice, and both this

experience of freedom, and its developmental and situated constitution, is much less understood. Thus, we draw on sociocultural psychology and the work of L. S. Vygotsky to argue for a *developmental* picture of freedom, bringing attention to ways in which psychology can make impactful contributions to how we grasp freedom, not merely by adding to discourse, but as torchbearers of the practical turn of freedom.

Negative and positive freedom

The political philosopher Isaiah Berlin has famously distinguished between two types of freedom[1]: positive and negative, each drawing on different sets of philosophers and thinkers (Berlin, 1969). Negative freedom as a concept is inspired by classical liberal thought, as Berlin in his 1969 essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" uses Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill to derive it. Negative freedom is defined as the absence of restrictions on the individual to such an extent that it can achieve its goals (Berlin, 1969). This way of thinking aligns with most Western liberal societies, as the concept of freedom here is most often seen as removing various restrictions on the individual. Berlin quotes Hobbes, who in the work *Leviathan* (1651) wrote that "a free man is one who is not prevented from doing what he wants" (Berlin, 1969, p.123).

In contrast to negative freedom's absence of restrictions, positive freedom is defined by the *presence* of abilities and opportunities to be one's own master (Berlin, 1969). Here Berlin relies on an idea of humans as having a higher form of "self" or "nature" that one should strive to express (Berlin, 1969). Positive freedom focuses on the possibility of realizing the human potential which is distinct from our biological operating basis (Berlin, 1969). For the person wanting a higher education to be free in the positive sense of the word, her admission to university is not enough; she must pass her exams and complete her studies. She must actualize her goal of obtaining a higher education – to achieve this, she must also master herself – if she is to be free. Berlin further believes that this form of freedom is historically different from the negative, and bases the positive freedom on, among others, Plato, Rousseau, and Hegel (Berlin, 1969; Nelson, 2005). Berlin's definition of positive freedom, however, has drawn some critique of it being a constructed distinction (Nelson, 2005; MacCallum, 1967).

The critique is based on Berlin's idea that positive freedom requires that the individual can control himself and free himself from any "internal" problems that prevents him from achieving his goal (e.g., anxiety or addiction). This blurs the boundaries between the negative and the positive freedom because both concepts come to rely on freedom from something. Indeed, to be free in the positive sense, there needs to be an absence of restrictions. So, just as in the case of negative freedom, we are dealing with a concept that deals with how a person must be free from restrictions e.g., urges, low self-efficacy, anxiety, or addiction. However,

[1] The paper by Berlin speaks of positive and negative 'liberty'. In this paper, we substitute 'liberty' for 'freedom'.

these will often be factors internal to the person rather than external. Thus, both concepts come to be about the absence of restrictions on the person, whether these are, for example, physical, legal, or mental (Nelson, 2005, p. 73f). In defense of Berlin, we could counter with the argument that positive freedom is achieved by an individual based solely on their unique life circumstances. Living with mental ill health or a physical disability does not make a person less free, it simply changes how they are able to manifest their freedom. Each person can act freely in accordance with their abilities. Berlin himself points this out in one of his alternative definitions of positive freedom that it: "(…) is self-mastery, the elimination of obstacles to my will, whatever these obstacles may be" (Berlin, 1969, p.146).

Gerald MacCallum has also dealt with Berlin's concept of freedom and was one of the first to make the above criticism. Instead of seeing freedom as two different concepts, he sees it as one concept that is triadic, because three elements must be included in the definition before freedom as a concept becomes meaningful (MacCallum, 1967). The first element is an agent or several different agents, the second is a restriction or barrier that prevents the agents from acting in a certain way, and the third element is what the agent wants to achieve with his action if there is no barrier (MacCallum, 1967). Freedom in this definition is not so far from Berlin's idea of negative freedom, here just in an expanded version: "Such freedom is thus always of something (an agent or agents), from something, to do, not do, become or not become something; it is a triadic relationship" (MacCallum, 1967, p. 314). If we return to the example of the person who wants a university degree, then according to MacCallum's view she is free if she can free herself from various constraints that hinder her in achieving her goal – whether these are problems with passing the exam, grades, or financial troubles. With this we also see how freedom becomes triadic, as we work with three factors – the agent, the goal of a university degree and the obstacles on her way towards this. However, it should also be clear that freedom is not a binary concept – if she is freed from the obstacles that are in her way, then she is not necessarily completely freed, as there may well be other situations where she cannot achieve her goals. Neither freedom nor unfreedom should, MacCallum (1967) points out, be seen as an absolute, as the concept then becomes neither philosophically useful nor terribly meaningful. Freedom in MacCallum's definition of freedom thus comes to contain a certain degree of relativity – the individual's freedom is relative, depending on the situation in which he finds himself. It is therefore problematic to talk about freedom as an absolute. In this sense, freedom is *situated* – a person may be free in one context, but not in the other. The definition of freedom that MacCallum puts forward is inspired by liberalism and if it is accepted in its pure form, then man is free for as long as others do not impose limits on him. However, we believe this view is a tad oversimplified, as it does not offer a particularly in-depth understanding of the free agent.

As Berlin has pointed out (1969), freedom is dependent on what one thinks human beings are; there is no universal definition of freedom. Instead, the concept must be seen as having arisen in a specific historical context. And according to Rose (1996, 1999b), psychology and freedom are interlinked, in the sense that psychology has helped shape and expand the intellectual frameworks people rely on when they act, and what they think of as possible. With this, freedom has become part of a management technique and the regulation of people, precisely by presupposing that the individual has a freedom to act and think (Rose, 1998; Rose, 1999b).

Freedom as authentic self-actualization

Humanistic psychology has been said to be a "[…] psychology of liberation focused on change and growth, a passionate vision that all human beings have dignity and worth." (Elkins, 2009, p.277), making it an apt point of departure of exploring a significant way of thinking about freedom within psychology. Historically, humanistic psychology arose as a backlash against the two dominant trends in psychology at the time – behaviorism and psychoanalysis (Elkins, 2009).

The influence of humanistic psychology which reached its high point in the 1960s and 1970s has, today, significantly diminished within academic psychology, having long become displaced by mainstream quantitative approaches. However, humanistic psychology and especially the ideas of Abraham Maslow, in particular his hierarchy of needs and concepts of self-actualization, have had a significant influence in practice, for example within management studies (Bridgman et al, 2018). Similarly, to the work of Maslow, the influential work of Carl Rogers on client-centered therapy focused on the actualizing potential of human beings, on the importance of personal development and – like Maslow – on the "[…] free expression of emotion […]" (Greenwood, 2015, p.528).

Abraham Maslow, who originally trained as a behaviorist, came to distance himself from behaviorism's stimulus-response explanations of human behavior (Fancher & Rutherford, 2017). Instead, he emphasized the human being as the source of its own behavior (Maslow, 1943, p. 371). The ultimate purpose for human beings was to actualize oneself: "What a man can be, he must be." (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). This need, he argued, like the need for food, safety, and love, originates from our biological origin - it is something that lies "within" us, and therefore wanting to realize oneself is something particularly human (Maslow, 1943).

Maslow considered freedom to be a prerequisite for the actualization of the self, instantiated in legal and political rights such as freedom of expression. In this sense, freedom for Maslow was both a practical necessity and an emotional need for autonomy - to *feel* free and in control of one's own behavior (Maslow, 1943). Similarly, Carl Rogers argued that the experience of "learning to be free" was the "[…] experience of

becoming a more autonomous, more spontaneous, more confident person. It is the experience of freedom to be oneself." (Rogers, 1962, p.47). Thus, Rogers emphasized how it was perfectly natural for a person to seek to become autonomous which is to say: how can the individual gain access to their true self (Rogers, 1995)? Thus, we see similar aspects of self-actualization in Rogers and Maslow - according to them, a person has a predetermined "essence" which, due to society and social influence, we cannot recognize by ourselves. With Maslow, a distinction can therefore be made between an understanding of freedom as being situated, societal freedoms, or more aptly rights that ensure *freedom from*, and the individual's understanding of himself as having free will or autonomy. For Rogers, freedom comes from the individual's realization of his or her true self. Rogers, we would argue, regards the freedom to choose as a kind of metaphysical free will. This variety of freedom can thus be produced through the therapeutic relationship, wherein one can be freed from society's influence and oppressive morality and realize that the truth comes from within and entails an individual freedom (Rogers, 1995, p.109; Rogers, 1962, p.48ff). Through this, for Rogers, one becomes a free and autonomous agent (Rogers, 1995, p.118ff). Both these psychologists thus offered ideas *of* freedom as a psychological concept, *and* they championed a psychology which would be centered on, in a sense, "liberation" of the self, of the freely expressing, engaged, realized self. Rogers and Maslow, like many other humanistic psychologists, saw emancipation as consisting in freeing people from society's morals and ethics (Rogers, 1962, p.48), and instead doing what feels right for the individual – in this way, one will no longer be bound by restrictions, but be free to master oneself. These arguments may feel somewhat antiquated, but it has been argued (Vitz, 1994) that both played crucial parts in fostering and strengthening a deeply individualistic culture across Western societies, focused on the realization of the 'true' and 'inner' self. Interestingly, on this point there is a vast divergence between humanistic psychology and the developmental perspective that we introduce in a later section. The question of whether there is a pre-existing essence or not, vastly influences how freedom can be understood psychologically.

Freedom as an impossibility

Humanistic psychology positioned itself against the behaviorist tradition which especially flourished in the USA throughout the first half of the 20th century. Within the tradition of behaviorism, we too find significant thinking about freedom, albeit of a much different kind. The history and legacy of behaviorism is too long and tangled to recount here. Suffice it to say that behaviorism was an influential strand of psychological thinking, usually dated to have begun with the psychologist John B. Watson's "manifesto", published in 1913, aptly titled "Psychology as the behaviorist views it" (Watson, 1913). Here, Watson argued that the purpose of psychology was to predict and control behavior (Watson, 1913), *not* to study – as had been central to psychology in the late 19th century and early 20th – *consciousness* via introspective methods. Watson is, today, perhaps most remembered as a sort of historical curiosity; as the author of a controversial manifesto and as

a proponent of an extreme "environmentalism" whereby the environment that one is situated in rules supreme, shaping and determining the psyche, the personality, the traits, the behavior, the predilections, and desires of the individual.

Watson's "environmentalist" position was often mocked. True enough, it was an extreme position to take up. Watson was indeed going much beyond his facts, but he was aware of this as is evident from this quote which is often shown in an abbreviated format exactly to mock the absurdity of Watson's position. Yet, reading the complete quote brings more nuance to his position:

> *"I would feel perfectly confident in the ultimately favorable outcome of careful upbringing of a healthy, well-formed baby born of a long line of crooks, murderers and thieves, and prostitutes. Who has any evidence to the contrary? […] I should like to go one step further now and say, "Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist […] regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary […]" (Watson, 1924, p.82, emphasis in original)*

In essence, Watson's extreme "blank slate" must be seen as a rebellion against the increasingly prevalent eugenics within psychology and society at the time: what we have here is rather a *polemic* against the facts provided by those who argue for the primacy of inheritance in the psychological constitution.

If Watson is usually seen as the progenitor of behaviorism, then B. F. Skinner was perhaps its most famous proponent. From the 1930s onwards, B. F. Skinner championed "radical behaviorism", which focused on studying observable behavior, and which railed against the still prevalent appeal to mental imagery in the explanation of behavior. Skinner emphasized the importance of contingencies of reinforcement, whereby the organism's behavior in the environment was *reinforced* by the consequences elicited by that very behavior (Skinner, 1953). For Watson and Skinner, the idea of *free will,* and indeed *freedom,* were illusions. Our experience, our behavior, our minds were, Skinner argued, best understood in behavioral terms (Skinner, 1963; 1990). For Skinner, it was not that people did not have experiences of psychological interiorities, it was simply that those experiences had been *reinforced* and that they were not necessary in the explanation of behavior (Skinner, 1963).

These ideas were influential in psychology, but it was in the 1970s that they came to public attention, as Skinner published a bestselling book called *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Skinner, 1971; Rutherford, 2009). In this book Skinner continued to argue that our behavior is shaped by what he called contingencies of reinforcement (Skinner, 1971; Rutherford, 2009). Controversially, he argued that society could be bettered by giving up "[…] our antiquated and sentimental belief in 'autonomous man' and embraced the science and

technology of behavior." (Rutherford, 2009, p. 34). Only by doing *this* might we be able to properly examine – and design – new contingencies of reinforcement and, thus, a new society. These ideas, unsurprisingly, became embroiled in significant controversy at the time, with many taking great offense to Skinner's notion that we should move *beyond* freedom (see Rutherford, 2009). Skinner thus took a remarkably different approach to the question of freedom. For him, exactly *because* free will were an illusion, the attempts of the "literature of freedom" of his time were mistaken. Skinner saw this literature's obsession with getting rid of unpleasant stimuli, to "liberate" people, as a misnomer since freedom is achieved by escaping unpleasant stimuli, e.g., getting rid of the restrictions imposed on you by society, akin to Berlin's description of negative freedom. Freedom, in this literature, is a matter of changing states of mind and feelings, which Skinner does not see as sufficient (Skinner, 1971). If freedom is tied to these states of mind and feelings, it means that once a person rids themselves of unpleasant stimuli, then they might feel free – even if it is not actually the case that they are. "Freedom literature" fails in its undertaking. It merely provides an action guide (not a philosophy of consciousness (Skinner, 1971). As Skinner describes it: "The literature of freedom has never come to grips with the techniques of control which do not generate escape or counterattack because it has dealt with the problem in terms of states of mind and feelings." (Skinner, 1971, p. 41). This results, for Skinner, in many techniques of control becoming overlooked. Behavior is not only reinforced or controlled via aversive consequences, but also via things such as wages (Skinner, 1971, p. 37)**.** Thus, as Skinner (1971, p. 42) argues, "Freedom is a matter of contingencies of reinforcement, not of the feelings the contingencies generate". Removing the chains from a slave does not buy their freedom. Humans, then, can only hope to achieve a kind of pseudo-freedom if they solely focus on escaping the forms of control, they perceive to be oppressive and therefore do not remove themselves from any "obscure limitations". Herein lies the problem with "freedom literature" for Skinner: because positive stimuli do not necessarily lead to positive consequences, positive stimuli can therefore function as obscure limitations that reduce human freedom with no one being the wiser (Skinner, 1971).

In sum, the humanistic psychologists represented a significant *celebration* of freedom as both a precondition for self-development and as an inherently individual project of self-actualization. Skinner, grounded in experimental psychology, instead saw such appraisals of freedom as a misnomer, which prevented in-depth discussions about how the social might be ordered. In other words, if humanistic psychology showcases the predilection within the discipline of psychology to embrace individuality and the support of the full extent of such individuality, then the tradition of behaviorism aligns much more overtly with a style of "social engineering" (Rutherford, 2017), by which the individual's behavior was sought to be controlled, shaped, predicted and so forth. Freedom, in Skinner's radical behaviorism, melts into contingencies of reinforcement.

Freedom as a governmental obligation

A radically different perspective on freedom is found within the work of the British sociologist Nikolas Rose. Building in part on the work of Michel Foucault, Rose's work has extensively explored both the discipline of psychology and the emergence of the modern liberal state, especially its various modes of governance:

> *"The significance of psychology within advanced liberal modes of government lies in the elaboration of a know-how of the autonomous individual striving for self-realization. In the nineteenth century, psychological expertise produced a know-how of the normal individual; in the first half of [the 20th century] it produced a know-how of the social person. Today, psychologists elaborate complex emotional, interpersonal and organizational techniques by which the practices of everyday life can be organized according to the ethic of autonomous selfhood." (Rose, 1999b, p.90)*

What is expressed here is the idea that psychology, through its manifold theories, experiments, and techniques – testing, therapy and so forth – have *produced* particular ways of being a person.
This is, of course, a radically different mode of understanding psychology than the one offered by Maslow, Rogers, or Skinner. Whereas they offer concepts for understanding a person, or scientific procedures for understanding behavior, Rose takes his point of departure in understand *how* these concepts and procedures arose, and *what* they do (Rose, 1998).

His work can be seen as a "[…] critical history of the relations between the psychological, the governmental, and the subjective" (Rose, 1998, 41). How did it become possible, in other words, for human beings to think of themselves as autonomous, free, authentic? This is, Rose argues, in part because of psychology. Not psychology understood as abstract theories, but as "[…] an 'intellectual technology', a way of making visible and intelligible certain features of persons, their conducts, and their relationships with one another" (Rose, 1998, pp. 10-11). Psychology, Rose argues, becomes instantiated in a plethora of concrete techniques and relations – in tests, screenings, therapy and, crucially, in the "[…] corps of trained and credentialed persons claiming special competence in the administration of persons and interpersonal relations […]" (Rose, 1998, p.11).

Psychology and related 'psy' disciplines have, Rose argues, been intrinsically related to the governance of human beings, in the sense that they provide techniques and territories for shaping the behavior of others, and how people come to shape themselves (Rose, 1998, p.12)**.** Through these technologies we "[…] have been freed from the arbitrary prescriptions of religious and political authorities [but] we have been bound

into relationships with new authorities, which are more profoundly subjectifying because they appear to emanate from our individual desires to fulfill ourselves in our everyday lives, to craft our personalities, to discover who we really are." (Rose, 1998, p.17). Freedom, then, is not something that resides inherently within the individual, but is rather an achievement; it is *produced* in the complex and variegated relations of modern society, with psychology playing a significant role, as its techniques and theories have carved out the realm of the psychological as one which can be, and should be, intervened upon. We are, Rose argues, "obliged to be free" (1999a, p.217), not through a sinister political machination that seeks to dominate us, but because "[…] modern selves have become attached to the project of freedom, have come to live it in terms of identity, and to search for the means to enhance that autonomy through the application of expertise." (Rose, 1999a, p.262).

This analysis (which has some similarities to Skinner's), casts the notions of authentic self-realization – and indeed the whole of humanistic psychology – in a radically different light. Considering Rose's analyses, these ideas are no longer comprehensible as uniquely and radically liberating ideas. Instead, these ideas can be seen as one cog in the machine of psychological subjectification. Rather than presenting a radically different way of being a person, Maslow's and Rogers' ideas can be seen as reinforcing and propagating ideas and techniques for becoming free: through personal development and through therapeutic techniques. These ideas, then, have been part of establishing the "inner life" of human beings, by establishing definitions of what the healthy and normal individual is, which creates a regime of normalization that suppresses otherness or alternative practices (May, 2004) i.e., restricting freedom rather than bolstering it.

Freedom as developmental?

In the previous sections, we have examined three different perspectives on freedom within – and about – psychology. Each of these accounts, however, are unsatisfactory. For humanistic psychologists, freedom becomes a personal project of self-development. For the behaviorist tradition, freedom is a misnomer. And in Rose's analyses, freedom is an unavoidable obligation, as people in advanced liberal societies are governed through freedom. While each account on its own has its problems, together they hold the potential for fashioning a developmental theory of freedom. By this we mean that humanistic psychology, despite its problems, has a crucial emphasis on the individuality of human beings and how each person is an organism striving to fulfill its inherent need for actualization vis-à-vis a milieu (Goldstein, 1995). Similarly, from behaviorism we would do well to keep in mind the *contingencies of reinforcement* which at every turn impose upon us as possibilities and impossibilities up and against which the organism struggles and affirms itself (Osborne, 2016). Lastly, the work of Nikolas Rose alerts us to how the psychological sciences and the variegated and multiple psychological technologies and techniques have played a significant part in forming the milieu in which human freedom becomes.

How, then, might we see the becoming of freedom, not simply as a process of self-actualization, nor of determination, nor of governmental subjectification, but as *psychological*? To do so, we will draw on the highly influential Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky. Vygotsky's work, which is still widely read today, was consistently focused on development and especially the processes through which "higher mental functions" are developed (Veresov, 2009). Vygotsky himself argued that the human will is a higher mental function and thus is developed socially and culturally: "[…] will develops and is the product of the cultural development of the child." (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 218). Vygotsky, then, provides a developmental perspective on freedom.

Before we delve further into this, it should firstly be mentioned that there are multiple interpretations and understandings of Vygotsky's ideas (Rey, 2011). For example, Rey (2011) distinguishes between three phases (somewhat overlapping) in Vygotsky's writings, each of which emphasize different things. Secondly, the argument that the *will develops* as a product of the cultural development of the child should, we argue, be seen as part of Vygotsky's second phase, which focused on the development of cognition, or what Vygotsky called the higher mental functions. For Vygotsky, the higher mental functions are mediated through cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1998b; Vygotsky, 1998c). Memory is the classic example of this, as it is clearly and concretely mediated using tools, such as calendars, shopping lists etc. Cultural development, Vygotsky argued, is reflected in our mental functions – as we develop more advanced technology, we simultaneously develop new mental functions – or perhaps more precisely, more refined mental functions. An example of this is mathematical calculations, for which various types of tools and sign systems have traditionally been used. Here, the technological development from ballpoint pen to writing instruments and formulas, to calculators and computers has had an enormous influence on our mental functions and the operations we have been, and are, able to perform within mathematics (Vygotsky, 1998b; Wagoner, 2011). The higher mental processes are the product of a complex synthesis between psychobiological processes and socio-cultural factors: "They [the higher mental functions] are constructed according to the pattern of development of new complex combinations of elementary functions through the development of complex syntheses." (Vygotsky, 1998a p. 84). Where the psychobiological processes are biologically determined, unconscious and non-cognitive, higher mental functions consist of, for example, logical memory, intellect or being in conscious control of one's own behavior (Ratner, 1998).

How, then, should we understand the idea that the will develops as an outcome of cultural development? Vygotsky, in a paper on "Self-Control" (Vygotsky, 1997), argues that human freedom consists specifically of our "ability to think." In situations where we do not know what to do, Vygotsky argues, we may reach towards various tools to help us choose and direct our will. A person may cast a die to decide between two outcomes,

or you may use a cookbook to pick what's for dinner. This ability to *think* is both supported by the social and culturally available artefacts, and it develops through that context. According to Veresov (2005, 2009), for Vygotsky the higher mental functions arise *as social relations* before becoming internalized. A classic example is the development of speech: it exists quite literally first as a social relationship between parent and child, before slowly (and in multiple phases) becoming internalized and private (see e.g., Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015). It is, we would argue, a similar case for the experience of willed and voluntary behavior. One can imagine the small child who has knocked a cup of off a table trying to reach a toy (see also Brinkmann, 2010a). The helpful educator or parent first asks: "Why did you do that?" and then, in cooperation with the child, explains the behavior e.g. "You knocked the cup over because you reached for the toy." In Vygotsky's terms, the will, as a higher mental function, develops culturally through such processes. It becomes constrained and tamed by the social relationships that the child is embedded within – that of words, that of parents, that of accountability. To put it differently: The 1-year-old child may experience thirst, and it may act upon that thirst (e.g., by crying, or grabbing the bottle of water) but it is only through its cultural socialization that it becomes aware of its own actions-in-relation to the thirst as an effect of its own will. It is only through the cultural socialization that it may come to recognize its own actions as freely willed and, in time, verbalize its own actions through the culturally constituted narratives of freedom and so forth. This is not to say that 'the will' itself develops socially – clearly, even infants have needs and any parent will testify that infants and children act in ways that are unpredictable, surprising, and often defying explanation and comprehension. But what we do want to suggest is that the ability to think, as Vygotsky put it, to think of oneself as possessing a will that may be obeyed (I am hungry, so I eat), or disobeyed (I want chocolate, but I eat broccoli instead, to watch my health), that ability is thoroughly developmental.

We would argue that this developmental perspective is a more fruitful direction for psychological explorations of freedom. It is more fruitful, because it allows distance from both the political and metaphysical questions pertaining to freedom. Freedom does not have to be an obligation or an existential Truth for it to have merit as a topic of interest. The developmental perspective highlights how freedom can also be understood to be a consequence of how we are interpellated into society through childhood viz. we are brought up to think about ourselves as having a free will not matter the actual truth of that belief. This brings out a contrast which we identify to be the crux of the whole question about freedom in psychology. Through Vygotsky, the social relationships are a necessary contingency for the notion of freedom to take root psychologically. The connections we share with other people are crucial for us to develop a view of ourselves as free beings. In a sense it is only through these bonds that freedom becomes feasible. It is ironic to consider that apparently our sense of freedom is developed socially but somehow needs to be realized individually.

At least, it is a notion that is easily deduced from humanistic psychology, and it has been societally embraced as a core, modern narrative. Erich Fromm was an early commentator on this very development, and his concerns ring all the louder when we take the developmental perspective into consideration.

Freedom in psychological thinking

A question now remains: how can psychology deal with freedom going forward? Psychology, as we have argued in this paper, has clearly concerned itself with freedom, and has, at least according to Rose, been entangled with the rise of liberal democracy. But the question of freedom is partly empty as, it considers only the possibility *for* and the experience *of* agency and autonomy, forgetting to ask 'why?' Why should we want freedom? What can, or should, we do with it? The psychologist Erich Fromm argued that these questions are important to ask since uninhibited negative freedom can send us on a path where we seek the annihilation of the thing we praise so loudly.

In Fromm's book "Escape from Freedom" (2020a/1941), he writes that what we have witnessed happen in the past centuries is an unprecedented development towards a more individualized freedom. Never have humans enjoyed liberty to the extent that is now seen. Freedom, however, has predominantly been of the negative kind, understood akin to the manner of Berlin's (1969) conceptualization of two liberties, where we now experience less interference from government, employers, communities, etc. We have fewer obligations than was ever the case. While Fromm observed this when he published his book in 1941, we can see the same development being observed and commented on more than 100 years earlier, in 1819, by French revolutionary Benjamin Constant, who wrote:

> *"(…) we can no longer enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power. Our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence." (Constant,* 1819/1988, 316*).*

Constant laments the loss of "ancient" freedom[2] but concludes that modern states and mercantile societies (that do not rely on slave labor) dictate new sets conditions that leads to changes in how freedom is practiced. It is this very same development in freedom Fromm comments on. Fromm makes the case that because freedom has been overwhelmingly of the negative kind, we often find that we do not know what to do with the freedom we have, since there is a lack of collective and active participation when it comes to administrating freedom. Freedom, then, becomes an obligation to do something in life that many people fail to live up to because they lack guidance and direction regarding how to use their freedom productively. Thus,

[2] A freedom which, as is a commonly known fact, was enjoyed only by a few, and made possible by the oppression of many.

they seek to escape it. Fromm identifies three avenues of escape: authoritarianism, destructiveness, or conformity. Taken together they form an ominous warning for the future, as Fromm summarizes in his later book *The Sane Society* (2020b/1955, p. 258):

> *In the 19th century inhumanity meant cruelty; in the 20th century it means schizoid self-alienation. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots. True enough, robots do not rebel. But given man's nature, robots cannot live and remain sane, they become "Golems"; they will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand any longer the boredom of a meaningless life.*

When freedom becomes too overwhelming and confusing human beings seek ways to impose order, this is Fromm's point. But the introduction of order, of something certain, often takes a form that reduces personal responsibility and the need to think for oneself. We can find the same said by Simone de Beauvoir in her description of what she calls *the serious man*. This is a person who "dissimulates his subjectivity under the shield of rights which emanate from the ethical universe recognized by him (…)" (De Beauvoir, 2018, p. 52). The serious man possesses the same sadistic and conformist qualities that Fromm ascribe to those that seek to escape their freedom. Today we might recognize those that seek this dissimulation of their subjectivity by their propinquity with authoritarian populist movements that are globally on the rise (Rose, 2017).

For Fromm, the paths to a more "sane society" can be found by giving up part of our freedom. Being free calls for a decrease of negative freedom – something that resonates well with the developmental perspective (it even resonates with Skinner's radical behaviorism), where social ties are crucial for the development of freedom. If social ties are part of developing a sense of self as free, might it not be reasonable to assume that it plays a role in maintaining that sense? What we can see is that the idea itself harmonizes well with Fromm's diagnosis; what is needed is more positive freedom, i.e., the voluntary, intuitive willingness to forge connections with other people. To enact one's freedom, it implies that you are no longer free from interference and obligation – just as was the case among the ancients as accounted by Constant (1819/1988). The ancients (viz. the free and privileged citizens of the polis Athens) had a larger say compared to the moderns in matters relating to how the society they lived in was shaped (whether to engage in commerce, to seek peace or go to war). They had a lot of positive freedom, whereas this is lacking in modern societies where, as established, our freedom is mostly negative. Most are isolated from decisions that affect how they are governed, and only govern themselves. The paraconsistent claim that obligation is a necessity for freedom can be found in many places in literature. It is a core underpinning of existential philosophy that humans are best understood as: "a totally conditioned social being who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him." (Sartre, 1972). Fromm describes this contingency or obligation to others as a panacea for the modern condition where freedom is more burden than privilege, which is ironic,

since the developmental account of freedom informs us, that were it not for other people, we would not consider ourselves to be free to begin with. The irony is this: we lose sight of the importance played by our attachment to other people as the means through which our freedom becomes exercisable. As we accrue age, independence, and more individual freedom, we think less about the conditions that were necessary for freedom's initial formation and constitution. As if we can remove ourselves from the condition that enabled something to flourish and keep it alive despite this.

Now, if we look at psychology's contribution, we could point to humanistic psychology and say: "But look, this is a psychology brimming with the power of positive freedom achieved through self-realization and self-improvement!" Alas, writing under the guise of freedom, we are dealing with a psychology that attempts, but does not achieve. If anything, the humanistic psychology has contributed to the confusion one might feel when faced with freedom, since it emphasizes all the things that should be achieved by free beings, yet it does little to provide a framework of how one goes about achieving those things. Nikolas Rose (2017, p. 306) says it well in the following quote:

> *It was not so much that we were freed, but that we were 'obliged to be free' – To try, in our ways, to be free, to imagine our life as a kind of enterprise created by acts of free choice, to assume our responsibilities as free consumers, freed to take control of choices from reproduction to nutrition in the market-place of options offered to us, freed to acquire many new responsibilities for our travails through private insurance for health and old age ... And the irony was that we were to believe that we must do all this in the name of our freedom.*

People seek to escape freedom because they do not know what to do with it. Freedom becomes an external thing that we must try to embody. Where society fails is that, while freedom has become axiomatic as a political reality, freedom has not been internalized as conditional for our existence. Self-actualization is realized through consumerism, travelling to the right places, and owning the right things. We seek to achieve the highest ethos of humanistic psychology through the eyes of others rather than to achieve it for ourselves. This perverts our perception of freedom, where it becomes an instrument that we employ to receive from others, the existentially soothing recognition of our existence. It has become unfathomable that the affirmation of us should be to ourselves. This is where humanistic psychology fails. Humanistic psychology wanted to lessen the mental ailments plaguing humankind but failed to recognize how the normative qualities of their prescription only darkened whatever existential abyss already resided in the souls of modern humans. Simone de Beauvoir (2018, p. 149) put it more succinctly:

> *"(…) the value of an act lies not in its conformity to an external model, but in its internal truth. We object to the inquisitors who want to create faith and virtue from without; and also the paternalism which thinks that is has done something for man by prohibiting him*

> *from certain possibilities of temptation, whereas what is necessary is to give him reasons for resisting it." (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 149)*

At its core, the matter of freedom is an ethical one; we think it wise to adhere to the advice of Simone de Beauvoir (2018) when she writes that we can only propose methods in matters of ethics. Instead of creating a psychology around what being free looks like, as is the case in humanistic psychology, we need to begin with the consideration: in what ways can people go about achieving more freedom? Recognizing the normativity intrinsic to psychology as a discipline and science (Brinkmann, 2010b) means that we should be careful when it comes to determining exact psychological requirements for freedom i.e., self-actualization as the end goal. As we have sought to show in the above, there has historically been a tendency in psychology to think about freedom as a binary, either you are free, or you are not. Instead, what follows from the situated perspective on freedom is to view freedom on a spectrum of degrees. Our freedom varies at any given time, since we are constantly participating in various activities that shape how this potential freedom can be actualized. To give an example of a possible avenue of research for psychology, one could look towards a behavioral conceptualization of freedom. Stephen Cave (2015) argues that we could potentially find ways to measure freedom (providing us with a freedom quotient like an intelligence quotient). Cave (2015) gives a definition of freedom as: "The ability to generate options for oneself, to choose, and then pursue one or more of those options." Essentially, this provides us with three phases: First is the ability to generate options, which relies on one's creativity, openness, and being intellectual adventurous, while also being constrained based on available resources and constraints from the social and environmental milieus in which one is embedded. Secondly, is the aptitude we possess for weighing options, which relies on our ability to reason, cognitive capacity (which is also affected by the environment, see Zhao & Tomm, 2018), and self-efficacy could be influential as well. And as the third phase there is the capacity to carry out and pursue the option. This is probably the hardest to pin down into something concrete. Cave (2015) calls this willpower and suggests one's ability to delay gratification could be of relevance in this phase, although it is the hardest ability to pin down exactly. What Cave outlines is a framework wherein the psychological intersects with the social and biological domain to provide a snapshot of to what degree a person possesses freedom in a certain, situated, moment. At least, it is one avenue where psychology as a discipline could contribute with knowledge-producing techniques that might allow us to get a firmer grasp on freedom and what facilitates or restrains how we are able to enact it. While we, the authors, do not necessarily want to have a 'freedom measure' per se, we are intrigued about the prospect of developing a more practical understanding of what contributes to free action.

Conclusion

It is one thing to contemplate the practicalities that are related to understanding freedom concretely. Still, if our preceding analyses are correct, the question remains: how should psychology go about examining (situated) freedom? We would argue that any such exploration ought to start with Vygotsky: the primary, and unanswered, question is not whether human beings have free will, but how they come to see themselves as free, in certain ways, and in certain places, and to certain ends. As we have argued above, one comes only to see oneself as free through a process of socialization. This encapsulates the peculiar dialetheism of freedom, the paradox inherent to the question of freedom – psychologically – a paradox which we have attempted to cut across by using the notion of situated freedom. The paradox is this: freedom is achieved and realized through obligation and dependency on others. As is a frequent refrain in much thinking, human beings are born weak and vulnerable, only able to realize their "free will" through a careful interplay with their caregivers. Older children and even adults, in turn, are only able to conceptualize their wills and wants through that which is given to them by way of socialization and culture. Culture equips us not just with practical and intellectual tools and skills, but also with the underlying *ability to see ourselves as free*, to frame our lives in those terms, and to drive ourselves towards particular goals. It is a beautiful illusion; for a moment get be radically free entities, only for us to grow old in age where again the need and dependency on others arise. In this sense, freedom is situated because it is developmental. The inescapable dependency was an important development in Sartre's thinking about freedom: to not see freedom as absolute but to also recognize the constraints that exist that make us unable to exert our freedom (Sartre, 1972). These dependencies and obligations that are necessary to commit to if we are to participate in society, then also make us less free. However, the achievement of unending negative freedom becomes a pointless indulgence of liberal fantasy. At some point negative freedom becomes "theoretical" if we do not use that freedom positively – negative freedom is the means that allow us to bind ourselves into systems of meaning. It is through this sacrifice that potential freedom is transmuted into actual freedom. Action entails binding oneself to certain paths, people, and institutions, which causes a necessary rejection of former possibilities. Even though potential is ethereal, it might still feel like giving up on something real. Losing something we imagine to be real will still be felt, which may explain why negative freedom so coveted. Action entails forging bonds and forming relationships. It is a gain but also a loss. This means that giving up on potential require that one can manage and navigate these complex feelings that accompanies freedom of action. In psychology, then, we can find a new mandate for our existence as a discipline if we aim to help people find positive outlets for practicing freedom. Not by determining *the* way to practice freedom but rather by highlighting the plethora of alternative paths that can lead to flourishing and self-actualization. Further

exploration could go in the direction of gathering a deeper understanding about how we are affected by negative freedom; what it means to possess and what it takes to give up. What hold does *the beautiful illusion* have on our cultural imagination and what happens when we shatter it? That is the task at hand for psychology.

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