Ethical detachment in defining freedom:

An inquiry into the possibility and usefulness of value-free and value-neutral concepts as proposed by Ian Carter

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Abstract

Ian Carter identifies a philosophical dispute about whether either all political concepts necessarily express ethical evaluation, or only some can be defined in empirical terms. Establishing the truth of the latter is especially interesting, since ethically loaded accounts often generate confusions and misunderstandings within moral and political discourse. Carter provides an alternative to the conflict, in claiming that although all political concepts are ethically loaded, it is possible to provide largely ethically detached accounts of certain political concepts, especially freedom.

Through his idea that ethical theories are shaped like traditional domes, Carter argues for the existence of empirically grounding value-free concepts. These are able to reveal which observable phenomena form the basis of a theory's reason-giving. Value-freeness is the first of Carter's two notions of ethical detachment, and proves useful in constructing or clarifying concepts within ethical theories. The second notion of ethical detachment is value-neutrality. Although ethical theories often differ, or even straightforwardly conflict, they might share certain understandings. Value-neutral concepts reveal such areas of intersection, while not implying the superiority of any of these diverging ethical theories. Some value-neutral concepts may be located at the empirical level, but others may concern ethically loaded concepts at a higher level of the hierarchy. Value-neutral concepts can be useful for normative theorizing, namely in helping ethical theories converge on a certain ethical value, but also can have a meta-theoretical aim, which involves abstracting from such theories in order to say something general about them.

For my inquiry into the possibility and usefulness of value-freeness and value-neutrality, I examine three examples he uses to illustrate his argument. Hillel Steiner provides a value-free concept because it is defined solely in empirical terms and grounds his ethical theory. I pose that Carter is unclear in his understanding of defining a concept in empirical terms, but suggest that this confusion is not highly problematic for his theory. Furthermore, Felix Oppenheim's concept of freedom is both value-free and value-neutral, since it does not presuppose the superiority of those ethical theories that endorse his concept. I suggest that the concept is only to a small extent value-neutral, but nevertheless useful. Finally, Gerard MacCallum generates a concept of freedom that is value-neutral, but also highly abstract. As such, it covers many possible interpretations of freedom, both value-free and non-value-free ones, and creates a wide common ground for ethical theories on freedom. Its abstractness serves a specific meta-theoretical purpose of revealing the general conceptual structure most people use when they talk about freedom

However, I question whether Carter is right to claim that absolute value-neutrality is impossible, and what this means for the limit to revealing something general about the human condition through value-neutral concepts. I investigate what kind of general claim MacCallum's concept might imply in combining it with other plausible assumptions. I argue that value-neutrality indeed has a limit within the moral realm, but suggest the possibility of stepping outside of that realm in another way. However, the resulting account of freedom will be less interesting for moral and political philosophers. I conclude that overall, Carter's theory makes sense and provides an original and useful perspective on the nature of ethical theories and their concepts, especially concepts of freedom.

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1 Introduction

While the meaning of freedom is much disputed, moral and political philosophers persist in their pursuit of providing accounts that might be coherent, acceptable, or at least sensible (see MacCallum, 1967; Steiner, 1994; Oppenheim, 1961).[1] They do this for varying reasons, through using various methods of analysis, depending for instance on their view on what freedom entails, or their aspiration to clear up misunderstandings within ethical disputes about freedom. In this essay I examine two particular methods for generating accounts of freedom, proposed by I. Carter (2015).[2] These methods are characterized by a certain degree of ethical detachment, and as such provide accounts that can serve as tools for clarifying and grounding existing ethical theories (2015: 297-304). The proposed notions of ethical detachment arise from Carter's theory of how ethical theories are typically structured. In the following I clarify how Carter's proposal fits in current literature, by illustrating the different ways in which thinkers generally have provided accounts of freedom.

1.1 Debates on the nature of freedom

I. Berlin (1969) famously argues that much of the dispute concerning the meaning of freedom is confused. Although many use the term 'freedom', for some it denotes a kind of positive freedom, such as the power to do or become, while for others it refers to negative freedom, for instance as the absence of physical obstruction by others. As such, people are often unknowingly arguing from contrasting ideological platforms (1969: p.131). Adhering to either positive or negative freedom in the political domain may have quite divergent implications for policies. While increasing negative freedom can imply a limit to government's control, increasing positive freedom may imply investment in social safety nets to support people. Understanding that some politicians are not talking about the same kind of freedom is of importance for both politicians and voters, since the resulting policies strongly rely on those interpretations.

However, it seems plausible that, although further interpretations differ, human beings do share a certain common understanding of what freedom entails. Indeed, according to for

[1] When I write 'freedom' I mean a the term that denotes concepts of freedom. Although I do not exclude the possibility of the existence of one true concept of freedom, it is not necessary here to take a stance on that particular debate. Whenever I do refer to such a concept I use small caps. Otherwise I simply write a concept of freedom, or freedom.

[2] By political concept, I mean a concept that functions within political discourse and often - if not always - is accompanied by ethical considerations and questions. Following J. Norberg, political concepts are "essential to any serious reflection on political life" and "form important building blocks of (...) political thought." (2015: p.1). Examples are freedom, equality, power and justice.

instance G. MacCallum (1967), those who adhere to either positive or negative freedom do not completely disagree about the meaning of freedom. In fact, further interpretations of freedom are grounded in one basic conceptual structure, used by everyone who refers to freedom (312). However, besides formulating a conceptual structure that reveals the way in which we generally *use* a term such as 'freedom', one could also attempt to formulate an account that captures the true meaning of FREEDOM. This idea resembles, according to G. Gaus (2000) Socrates' pursuit of the essential meaning of political concepts such as JUSTICE (3-7). According to Socrates, says Gaus, we know intuitively that political concepts refer to something real, since they make sense and are important to us. Their essential features can be found through inquiry based on these fundamental intuitions - which rules out interpretations that are based on less fundamental intuitions. Such an investigation eventually generates an account that explains all genuine instances of the concept without containing contradictory claims (2000: 7). For Socrates, philosophy is needed to clear up confusions about the essential meaning of concepts in order to be properly guided by them - especially political concepts such as JUSTICE, FREEDOM, and EQUALITY (2000: 23).

Opposing the conviction that the essential core of concepts can be captured in a single definition, the doctrine of logical positivism claims that philosophy's aim should only be to explain why and how we use a concept (2000: 9). In this context, L. Wittgenstein (2013) argues that although concepts such as GAME and FREEDOM contain a sensible unity, they mainly consist of overlapping understandings and interpretations, or 'family resemblances', and therefore one definition is not enough to explain them. We should look at the way in which such a concept functions in different contexts in our life, not try to find its essential meaning (sect. 67).

Although illuminating, merely trying to understand how we generally use political concepts in our daily language and thought may seem unsatisfying for moral and political philosophy. According to Gaus, the question 'how do we use the term freedom?' is much less interesting and important than the question 'what is freedom?'. The latter urges thinkers to pursue accounts of freedom that tell us what we ought to do in life - "a well-supported and coherent concept of [freedom] to guide our deliberation and action" (2000: 23). Such an account needs to point out what is right and what is wrong - for instance, when it is wrong to physically constrain another person, or when it is right to improve another person's freedom. It must express a clear ethical view in order to provide normative guidance.

But is expressing one's ethical view really necessary for the aim of providing a coherent, or at least sensible account of freedom that might provide practical guidance? Moreover, for the aim of revealing the way in which people generally refer to freedom, it seems that one can take an ethically detached perspective.

1.2 Three notions of ethical detachment

Carter (2015) identifies an ongoing dispute in the above questions, that concerns the presence or absence of ethical considerations in accounts of political concepts such as freedom. As Carter illustrates, some thinkers such as R. Dworkin (1996) claim that a political concept like freedom is unavoidably accompanied by an expression of an ethical theory that gives reasons for why a particular situation contains instances of unfreedom. As such, political concepts are always ethically loaded. They presuppose or imply, through their analysis or definition, implicitly or explicitly a kind of ethical judgement (2015: 279-282). Political concepts therefore contrast with for instance a concept of LION, that can be explained solely by empirically observable criteria, for instance its DNA, and probably the combination of a cat-like body, blonde manes, big teeth and sharp claws. A concept of freedom or justice, however, can only be explained through the value system of which it is part (2015: p.284). Claiming what justice is, is necessarily accompanied by the values one adheres to. Likewise, referring to someone as being a just person entails an approval of their behavior, and is an expression of one's ethical theory on what counts as just behavior.

For instance, Dworkin (1996) "defines liberty as the possibility of doing what one would be able to do in an ideally egalitarian society." (Carter, 2015: 300). His concept of freedom must be understood through his egalitarian ethical theory. Another example is that of the concept of justice of K. Marx (1875), who states that justice in the communist society should entail that each does what one is able to do, and that all collective wealth is redistributed in accordance to each's needs (215). His idea of justice is entangled with his ideal of a communist society in which wealth is redistributed in a certain way.

On the other hand, says Carter, thinkers such as H. Steiner (1994) claim that it is possible to formulate accounts of certain political concepts, such as freedom, that are completely detached from ethical considerations, and therefore not imply ethical statements. Such an account purely describes things or phenomena in the world, without any reference to what one values ethically about the concept it expresses. Those who adhere to this idea make a distinction between concepts that are necessarily ethically evaluative, such as justice, and concepts that can be purely descriptive and therefore non-evaluative, such as freedom.[3] Defining such a descriptive concept involves referring solely to observable phenomena in the world, while not a single aspect of that definition is linked to an ethical value or view (2015: 282). Such an account, if possible, would denote a 'value-independent' concept:

[3] Henceforth, following Carter, I mean ethically evaluative when I write evaluative, as well as ethical value when I write value, since I will use the terms frequently in the forthcoming (see Carter, 2015: 281).

> "**Value-independence**: a concept is value-independent if its definition can be justified purely in terms of theoretical-explanatory considerations, and not at all in terms of ethical considerations." (Carter, 2015: 285)

As illustrated, the concept of lion can be expressed through a definition that sets out the empirical criteria for an entity to be called a lion, such as the arrangement of its DNA. Such a concept is value-independent. Oppenheim (1961) attempted to provide such a descriptive definition of freedom, motivated by the idea that social scientists need an empirical concept of freedom as a tool that serves in a "fruitful pursuit of empirical knowledge." (2015: 286).

However, such a motivation is what R. Dworkin (1996) calls archimedeanism. He is not convinced by this method. "Archimedeans", he says, "are bad metaphysicians who think that the old-fashioned, full-blooded, shameless morality of the face value view needs non-moral foundations." (127). 'Face value view' means that there is objective truth to morality, and that morality is a distinct dimension. According to Dworkin, archimedeans such as Oppenheim claim to be able to transcend the moral realm, and say something meaningful about the world and human beings from that external, neutral perspective. However, one can only step out of the moral dimension by dismissing the existence of morality altogether, just as one must dismiss reason itself if one wants to step outside of it to judge it from above (1996: 128).

Carter (2015) agrees with the idea that a political concept such as freedom cannot be completely value-independent, and defined from a perspective that is outside of the moral realm. However, in contrast to Dworkin, Carter thinks that certain political concepts, such as freedom, can approach a *mild* form of value-independence, while not being wholly detached from the ethical perspective they play a part in (2015: 282). Therefore, Carter says, the conflict concerning the presence or absence of ethical considerations in providing an account of a political concept such as freedom is misled by the idea that a concept either does, or does not express an ethical view, and thus is either evaluative or descriptive. The disagreeing parties fail to recognize that there exist three notions of ethical detachment, which makes it possible to generate accounts that are ethically detached *to a certain extent* (2015: 280).

1.3 A worthwhile pursuit

But even if these are possible, why should philosophers pursue them? There are several reasons as to why such kinds of ethical detachment are useful, both for normative theorizing and conceptual analysis. Carter shows these benefits through elaborating on the possibility of ethical detachment. However, there are also reasons to actively *avoid* definitions that are ethically loaded. For instance, J. Olsthoorn (2017) claims that largely ethically loaded accounts, or 'moralized definitions', especially pose problems for conceptual analysis. A

philosopher that aims to analyze political concepts should therefore avoid defining concepts in terms of other concepts or values (174).

The first reason is that since there is much disagreement on what freedom means, ethically loaded concepts of freedom are often not suited as tools for social sciences. When ethical considerations influence the definition of such concepts, they are not part of a common vocabulary that social scientists can use in order to assess their empirical data. Thus, Olsthoorn approves of Oppenheim's mentioned aspiration. Although Olsthoorn thinks that freedom always invokes evaluation, it has a descriptive component that can be properly separated and formulated in a purely descriptive definition, forming a tool for social sciences to better understand social and political phenomena (173-174). Furthermore, definitions that are purely descriptive and not imply the superiority of one ethical perspective over the other, will be accepted on a greater scale in social science than those which attract only certain groups of people (177).

Second, confusions arise when people use the same term 'freedom' to denote diverging concepts of freedom. In this case, moralized definitions are often accompanied by a claim on the truth of the meaning of that term (174). Re-labelling such distinct concepts, for instance calling them positive and negative freedom, as Berlin (1969) proposed, may solve such confusions. Another possibility for analyzing what people mean with the term 'freedom' is by examining the way in which it is most often used, as MacCallum (1967) attempted.

However, while Olsthoorn emphasizes the disadvantages of moralized definitions in conceptual analysis, such definitions also seem to pose problems for normative theorizing. For instance, if moral or political philosophers want to be able to discuss their theory with others who disagree, they should not presuppose ethical claims through defining their concepts in terms of other, perhaps controversial concepts. If they do, they limit the debate. While Olsthoorn (2017: 174) thinks this is also primarily problematic for conceptual analysis, I suggest that it is for normative theorizing as well. To illustrate, J. Raz (1986) defines his concept of positive freedom as "[a capacity that is] intrinsically valuable because it is an essential ingredient and a necessary condition of the autonomous life." (Raz, p.414). In other words, freedom is the capacity to be autonomous. However, in defining freedom such terms, Raz is presupposing the answer to the question whether freedom is linked to autonomy. He therefore implicitly dismisses all theories on freedom that do not adhere to this idea. Surely, such disagreement is inevitable in normative theorizing. But a definition of freedom that does not imply such an idea, may enable two parties to discuss *why* it furthermore must be linked to autonomy.

Moreover, those who follow an ethical theory in which a certain definition expresses multiple concepts and values, may not find clear practical guidance. Such ethically loaded accounts need much explanation, rendering the criteria for application unclear – which is,

again, what Olsthoorn thinks is problematic for conceptual analysis as well (2017: 174). For instance, by including a concept of autonomy in one's concept of freedom, one needs to understand what it means to be autonomous first, in order to understand what it means to be free.

In other words, both conceptual analysis and normative theorizing seem to gain from avoiding largely ethically loaded accounts of political concepts, and therefore may need to seek accounts that are instead ethically detached. The subsequent question, then, is how such accounts are possible, especially while keeping in mind that political concepts eventually seem to be ethically loaded.

1.4 An inquiry into the possibility and usefulness of ethical detachment

Carter suggests the possibility of accounts of political concepts that are not absolutely, but to a certain extent ethically detached. He identifies one notion of *complete* ethical detachment, namely value-independence, and two notions of *limited* ethical detachment, namely value-freeness and value-neutrality. This novel idea he presents in his essay "Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts" (2015).

My aim is to inquire whether Carter is right to claim the possibility of finding and constructing value-free and value-neutral concepts, and whether pursuing them is indeed worthwhile. I argue that his overall theory makes sense and gives an original insight into the nature of ethical concepts, but also identify a few problematic points that may weaken his argument. Throughout this essay the political concept of freedom serves to illustrate Carter's proposal, both to follow his own examples and because of my personal interest in understanding the way in which human beings regard and value freedom.

Carter argues for value-freeness and value-neutrality on the basis of his specific theory of how ethical theories are structured. Therefore, I first explain this idea, from which a general elaboration of the meaning of value-free and value-neutral concepts naturally follows (chapter 2). In order to subsequently answer the question whether such partly ethically detached accounts of freedom are in fact possible, and pursuing them worthwhile, I scrutinize his argument on the basis of his own examples of such accounts, namely that of Steiner (1995), Oppenheim (1961) and MacCallum (1967). Moreover, I inquire into Carter's claim that absolute value-neutrality, and therefore value-independence, is impossible (chapter 3-5).

2 Carter's proposal for value-free and value-neutral concepts

2.1 Introduction

To start the inquiry of the possibility and usefulness of kinds of ethical detachment in providing accounts of freedom, I now turn to Carter´s broader theory of how ethical theories are structured. I elaborate on his idea of ethical theories as shaped like traditional domes (2.1) and grounding networks (2.2), which forms the basis for subsequently clarifying value-freeness (2.3) and value-neutrality (2.4).

2.2 Ethical theories as domes

According to Carter, "moral philosophers are in broad agreement that all ethical properties are ultimately grounded in empirical properties." (2015: 292).[4] Certain empirical properties such as bodily movements, natural phenomena, and other observable things in the world, which themselves consist of more specific physical movements, ground evaluative properties or claims "that we refer to in making evaluations" (2015: 292). For instance, the observable movement of one person's fist rapidly flying into another person's face, may lead a third to evaluate this movement as being wrong. Such an evaluation may subsequently be linked to a wider idea of justice of that person.

Crucial to Carter's further argument is his claim that while some evaluative properties are grounded *directly* in empirical properties, other evaluative properties are more abstract and therefore grounded in empirical properties only *indirectly*, namely through other evaluative properties.

Carter illustrates this idea by imagining an ethical theory like a dome, particularly a traditional non-geodesic dome. Such a dome has a clear pinnacle from which all stones descend towards the round fundament, that is eventually build upon land. As such, a dome-shaped ethical theory has a highest concept, namely its "maximally general evaluative property" (2015: 296) like goodness. But the closer the evaluative properties are to the ground, the more likely they are defined in terms of empirical properties. Eventually, some of them will be directly attached to the ground. These last evaluative properties, although still part of a particular ethical theory, can be described purely in terms of empirical properties. As such, they construct the fundament of the ethical theory as a whole, and ground all evaluative

[4] Following Carter, an empirical property refers to those specific "qualities, aspects and relations or movements of things or bodies" (Kovesi, 1967: 34) that are empirically observable. For instance, the specific movement of me jumping up and down is an empirical property, just as a water bottle falling down from a table, but also the greenness of grass.

properties that are located higher up in the hierarchy. They are the basis of a theory's reason-giving (2015: 293).

As such, just like a dome has vertical supporting beams that start at the pinnacle and descend to different sides and eventually reach the ground, an ethical theory consists of supporting chains of reasons that descend from abstract ideas of how things should be, to the observable empirical properties in which these are eventually grounded.

For instance, in claiming that an equal distribution of collective wealth is right, I probably have in mind several reasons for why this is so. These reasons themselves are based upon other reasons, and so on, until they eventually point at certain observable phenomena which I directly evaluate as wrong or right. Such chains of reasons explain different aspects of my general claim, such as why I think there should be an equal distribution of wealth, instead of a distribution that merely makes sure everyone has minimal basic needs. Another reason may explain why I think that wealth should be distributed in the first place, or why I assume that wealth is owned collectively. All these reasons are based upon other reasons, which are essentially grounded in certain empirical properties that have caused, which I would call, an *evaluative trigger*, a feeling that a specific situation in the world is either right or wrong. According to Carter, the more general an ethical idea within a theory, the more extensively it depends upon multiple other ideas and concepts that are part of different chains of reasons (2015: 304).

2.3 Ethical theories as grounding networks

Moreover, just as the vertical beams of a dome are supported sideways by horizontal beams, certain concepts that function within different chains of reasons may be linked to each other - although not necessarily while being located exactly on the same level. For instance, both concepts of equality and freedom may play a part in a higher ethical category in the hierarchy. However, they are not grounded in the same empirical properties, and may be part of other categories within that theory that the other concept is not part of. Thus, explaining a certain conception of one's concept of justice may involve elaborating both concepts of equality and freedom. As such, an ethical theory is not only hierarchical, but also shaped like a complex network of connected concepts on different levels and side of its dome-like structure:

> "The complete set of properties referred to by a particular ethical outlook will amount to a grounding *network*." (Carter, 2015: 289)

Thus, shedding light on the meaning of certain concept within an ethical theory may require not only an understanding of those concepts that are directly down or up in the hierarchy, but also those that share a part in grounding a higher concept. Carter sees this as the possibility

of ‘holistic normative analysis’, which allows one to “shed light on the nature of each property in terms of its position with respect to other properties in the grounding network.” (2015: 290).

However, Carter admits that one can take on another approach as to what ethical theories look like. For instance, while holding on to the idea that an ethical theory is structured like a network in which all values are interconnected, one could claim that it resembles a flat disc rather than a hierarchy. As such, those values are collectively grounded in the empirical, not through certain lower-located concepts such as freedom. However, says Carter, an ethical theory needs to be able to link one’s ethical ideas to what actually happens in the world in order to provide practical guidance. Although such a collectively grounded network may be able to explain which observable phenomena support its reasons, in order to provide guidance, one needs to understand all implications of any evaluation resulting from one’s theory, which would require “monumental powers of reflection covering the entire expanse of a coherent system of values.” (2015: 295).

To recall, Carter’s theory is meant to clarify why a particular conflict concerning the presence or absence of ethical considerations in generating accounts of political concepts is based upon a confused idea about the nature of such concepts. While Dworkin (1996) claims that all political concepts are necessarily ethically loaded, and ethical detachment is impossible, Steiner (1994) thinks that at least certain concepts, such as freedom, can be defined completely free of ethical considerations. Considering Carter’s idea of how ethical theories are structured, both Dworkin and Steiner seem wrong in making a sharp distinction between those concepts that are essentially evaluative and those that can be solely descriptive. But in viewing ethical theories as hierarchical grounding networks in which the lowest concepts are directly grounded in the empirical, Carter (2015) recognizes both Steiner’s intuition that certain concepts are more descriptive than others, and Dworkin’s thought that all political concepts are essentially part of an ethical theory. Ethical detachment is possible, but only to a certain extent.

2.4 Value-freeness: bridging the empirical and the evaluative

The first notion of ethical detachment concerns those lowest concepts. Regarding ethical theories as eventually grounded in the empirical must mean that somewhere along the line, there are concepts that in a way *bridge* the relevant empirical properties with that theory’s chain of evaluative reason-giving. In other words, these must function as the last evaluative element of their particular ethical theory. Such concepts are then “defined empirically but used evaluatively” (2015: 295), and support the way in which an ethical theory describes the world. They are therefore value-free. Carter provides the following definition:

> "**Value-freeness**: a concept is value-free if its definition is such that the *definiens* contains no evaluative terms." (2015: 284).

Thus, the way in which one recognizes a value-free concept within an ethical theory is by establishing whether its definition is purely descriptive or not. Constructing a value-free concept amounts to making sure that the *terms* that determine the meaning of the concept, namely the definiens, do not express any evaluation.

Carter distinguishes between two kinds of terms that express evaluation: essentially and non-essentially evaluative terms. Terms that denote a concept which *necessarily* implies evaluation, either positive or negative, are essentially evaluative (284). Following Carter's argument carefully, those terms that express essentially evaluative concepts are for instance 'good', 'right', or 'bad', but also 'cruel', 'reasonable' and 'generous'. The latter set of terms express concepts that have a partly descriptive content, but are primarily used *because* they express an evaluation. For instance, the concept of cruelty generally refers to a situation in which one person does, broadly speaking, something hurtful to another person or being, such as pulling out their fingernails. Although the concept of cruelty refers to a more specific phenomenon than concepts of good or bad, its emphasis is on its negative evaluation. The situation in which one person pulls out another's fingernails can be referred to without the use of the word 'cruel', but using the latter enables one to simultaneously express disapproval. Therefore, 'cruelty' denotes an essentially evaluative concept.

According to Carter, a term that is evaluative, but only non-essentially, is itself a description but often *used* as an evaluation. Whether or not such terms involve evaluation depends on the ethical perspective of the user. Carter uses the example of the term 'slobber'. While the term strictly describes the way in which someone eats his food, often the one using the term is expressing disgust, in other words a negative evaluation of this way of eating (2015: 284). Therefore, for one who adheres to the idea that etiquette is of value, and soup should not be slobbered, the concept has an evaluative connotation. Although the terms 'cruelty' and 'slobber' seem alike since they both describe *and* evaluate, the former is *always* used evaluatively, while the latter depends on the ethical stance of the user.

According to Carter, an example of a value-free concept is that of Steiner (1994). Although Steiner's concept of negative freedom functions within his particular ethical theory, its definition does not contain any evaluative terms (2015: 284). Value-free concepts are therefore to a certain extent ethically detached. A small remark I would make concerning Carter´s choice of calling such concepts value-free, is that it might give rise to the idea that the concept is therefore not ethically loaded, instead of this merely referring to the definition being value-free.

2.5 Value-neutrality: finding common ground

The second proposed notion of ethical detachment is value-neutrality. According to Carter (2015), it is possible to shed light on certain concepts by revealing the way in which these are, in a way, shared by otherwise contrasting ethical theories. One way of doing this is by *revealing* such an area of intersection, another by *constructing* such an area of intersection. This can be done by generating accounts that express a set of multiple ethical perspectives, while not implying a preference over any of those perspectives. In other words, such a concept is therefore referred to as being value-neutral. As defined by Carter:

> "**Value-neutrality**: a concept is value-neutral if its use does not imply the superiority of any one of a set of contrasting substantive ethical points of view." (2015: 285)

Carter distinguishes between two kinds of value-neutral concepts, namely those that are used for normative reasons and those sought for meta-theoretical purposes. First, normative value-neutrality consists of identifying "shared normative concepts within otherwise divergent value-systems." (2015: 296). A normative value-neutral concept helps disagreeing parties to converge on these shared ethical values. Some value-neutral concepts express a shared *ethical* value, and therefore form an area of intersection located at a more or less high, evaluative level. An example, says Carter, is the Rawlsian concept of justice as equal liberty, which is defined in evaluative terms but does not express the superiority of any of the diverging theories that adhere to it (2015: 298).

On the other hand, a normative value-neutral concept that is value-free creates an area of intersection at the empirical level, namely at the ground of the dome-shaped theories. For instance, while certain liberal and socialist theorists might disagree on how freedom is to be arranged and distributed, they may agree on a certain empirically defined concept of freedom. Oppenheim (1961) provides such an account, namely of social freedom, which constructs a common ground between many different ethical value systems (Carter, 2015: 297).

A second kind of value-neutrality is sought for meta-theoretical purposes, and is characterized by a kind of abstraction that may reveal something more general about human values. As such, meta-theoretical value-neutrality can be used to shed light on differences between ethical theories, or show which general and often abstract categories such contrasting theories share. They can do this by revealing a "basic conceptual structure that is common to a set of different concepts" (2015: 285). Carter illustrates this kind of value-neutrality by elaborating on the basic concept of freedom that MacCallum (1967) provides. His abstract account captures many possible interpretations of freedom, while not implicitly or explicitly choosing one of those over the others (2015: 300).

Important to note is that Carter does not think that absolute value-neutrality is possible, namely “neutral with regard to *all conceivable* ethical points of view” (2015: 285). A highly abstract concept, however, might approach such absolute value-neutrality by capturing many ethical perspectives.

2.6 Conclusion

In short, both value-free and value-neutral concepts are supposed to give us a better understanding of political concepts and the ethical perspectives they are a part of. They can help us find common ground between different ethical perspectives, or reveal the specific empirical properties that such theories are fundamentally build upon. In what follows, I examine their possibility and use, as proposed by Carter. To recall, I focus especially on freedom, since it is a much-disputed concept, and the question whether it is possible to generate accounts of it that are largely ethically detached seems quite interesting. Moreover, several thinkers such Steiner, Oppenheim, and most importantly Carter claim that especially concepts of freedom, in contrast to for instance concepts of justice, can be value-free or value-neutral. In the following I first inquire into the possibility and use of value-freeness, on the basis of Steiner’s alleged purely descriptive definition of his concept of freedom.

3 Value-free concepts: Steiner and negative freedom

"Value-freeness: a concept is value-free if its definition is such that the definiens contains no *evaluative terms*." (Carter, p.284, italics added).

3.1 Introduction

Although Carter thinks that political concepts are always ethically loaded, and therefore never completely value-independent, he deems it possible and useful to give accounts of some of them that are largely value-free, value-neutral, or both. The first step of my analysis of Carter´s proposal for such accounts, in this case of freedom, is a focus on a concept that is value-free, but not value-neutral. As exemplified by Carter, I scrutinize value-freeness on the basis of Steiner's descriptive definition of negative freedom provided in his book *An Essay on Rights* (1994) (3.2). Subsequently I clarify the meaning of non-essentially evaluative terms, and on that basis attempt to determine whether Steiner's concept is value-free in Carter's sense (3.3). However, his criteria for establishing a non-essentially evaluative term seem unclear. But through further interpreting Carter, I suggest this confusion is not highly problematic for the possibility of value-free concepts (3.4). I finally examine the use of Steiner's value-free concept for his own ethical theory (3.5).

3.2 A purely descriptive definition

According to Steiner, justice is about the way in which freedom-relations between people are arranged, without implying a preference over any of the diverging ethical values people choose to pursue through their freedom. However, linguistic confusions about the term 'free' and related terms cause inconsistencies in theories of justice. They give rise to different intuitions about what it means to be free, while some of these intuitions conflict with each other (1995: 1-2). For instance, it seems sensible that 'unfree' generally refers to being unable to do something, caused by a certain constraint. However, one may also claim that 'unfree' refers to being disabled only by a constraint that is morally wrong. As such, one is neither free nor unfree when accidentally being locked up in the basement by a friend, because the constraint was not caused by a deliberate immoral decision. However, it is counterintuitive to claim that one is free while locked unwillingly in a basement.

Steiner thinks that such conflicting intuitions generate diverging theories of the moral permissibility of certain constraints, and it is not clear which one is preferable over the others. Moreover, such conflicting intuitions yield inconsistent statements or sets of rights, which therefore do not provide clear practical guidance for legislators or judges in court. But, says Steiner think that one should base a coherent account of justice on a certain *fundamental* intuition about freedom, of which he derives the following definition:

> "(i) a person is unfree to do - is prevented from doing - an action if and only if the action of another person would render his doing it impossible" (Steiner, 1994: 33)

The definition is based upon Steiner's commitment to the idea that a person is free to do what he *actually* does, and, consequently, unfree if another person's action renders that action impossible. This idea does not follow from a moral intuition, but, he says, from our general linguistic use of terms like 'free' and 'freedom'. Therefore, "this pure negative conception is uncontroversially an empirical or descriptive one" (1994: 9). In other words, statements that follow from it do not presuppose the significance or permissibility of actions involved in instances of freedom or unfreedom. The definition is solely a description of an observable situation, and also adheres to our ordinary language. Within social sciences, it is capable of providing intelligible judgments about instances of freedom or unfreedom. Therefore, Steiner refers to his method as 'preliminary conceptual analysis', which enables one to generate an ethically detached account of freedom that adheres to what people essentially think freedom entails (1994: 2-7).

To recall, Carter does not think that any account of freedom can be completely detached from ethical considerations. The fact that such an account *picks out* certain specific empirical properties as a reason for identifying an instance unfreedom, while dismissing other empirical properties as potential identifiers of freedom, is in itself necessarily ethically loaded. Thus, he says, although Steiner claims that his definition does not presuppose any ethical judgments, he uses it as part of his particular ethical perspective. However, his concept may serve as the last evaluative element within that theory, and therefore as a value-free concept. In order to find out whether Steiner's definition is indeed denotes such an important value-free concept, I examine in the following whether it is defined solely in empirical terms. In other words, whether the definiens, consisting of all the relevant or decisive terms, does not contain any essentially or non-essentially evaluative terms, such as 'good' and 'slobber'.

3.3 Evaluative connotations in Steiner's definition

The most relevant terms in Steiner's definition are 'person', 'unfree', 'prevented', 'action', and 'impossible'. Since 'unfree' is part of that which Steiner wants to define, namely 'a person who is unfree to do an action', it is not part of the definiens. Moreover, since the point of evaluative terms is that they denote an evaluative *concept*, I regard the two terms 'another' and 'person' as together denoting a single concept, namely another person. Similarly, 'render' and 'impossible' denote a concept of rendering impossible.

Do any of these terms denote non-essentially evaluative concepts? According to Carter, concepts that are non-essentially evaluative are concepts that describe, but nevertheless often used evaluatively (2015: 284). 'Another person' does not seem to meet this criterion. I can hardly imagine an ethical perspective in which the concept of another person invokes positive or negative evaluation, except for instance one that claims that all other persons are evil. Similarly, the term 'action' does not seem to denote a non-essentially evaluative concept. It would be weird to hear someone exclaim: "Oh my god, he is performing an action! That is so *wrong*." Instead, moral and political theories are mostly concerned with laying out the rules and prescriptions for which *particular* actions are right or wrong in specific contexts and circumstances. To conclude, the terms 'another person' and 'action' do not denote concepts that are often, if ever, used evaluatively.

The other terms are 'prevented' and 'render impossible'. Are the concepts they denote solely used to describe, like those of 'tree' or 'lion', or are these also often used evaluatively? According to Carter, the concepts that such terms denote are non-essentially evaluative when their use "not necessarily express[es] evaluation, but often has evaluative connotations." (2015: 284). What does it mean for a concept to invoke evaluative connotations through its use? Carter says that using the concept of slobbering is often accompanied by a 'strong emotive force', and in that sense it serves in providing 'evaluations of the world' for the user (p.284).

The concepts that 'prevented' and 'rendering impossible' denote often play a role in evaluative contexts. For instance, preventing someone from falling under a bus is mostly evaluated positively, just as rendering impossible a person's action of killing other people. Thus, the use of these concepts seems to be accompanied by evaluative connotations. However, prevention may also be used in a context in which it does not invoke positive evaluation, such as when someone is prevented from leaving the house due to another person barring all the doors and windows - which, in other words, renders it impossible for the former to leave the house. The content of the evaluation depends on the specific context in which one is prevented from doing something, or where an action is rendered impossible. Without context, one cannot judge the right- or wrongness of such situations, unless there were some ethical theory that deemed *any* kind of prevention or rending impossible as right or wrong. The concepts that the terms 'prevention' and 'rendering impossible' denote are therefore in most if not all cases used purely descriptively, referring to empirical properties only.

3.4 Establishing non-essentially evaluativeness

However, Carter points out that Steiner's concept of freedom is value-free particularly within his own ethical theory. His concept "serves, from its user's ethical point of view, to provide evaluations of the world" (2015: 284). As such, in establishing non-essentially evaluativeness

it should not matter whether it is used that way often: what is relevant, is whether its use invokes evaluative connotation for the user. This also implies that even when a term within a definition denotes a concept that is used evaluatively by many, that concept may still be purely descriptive in the view of some other people.

As such, there are indeed certain descriptive concepts that are not *often* used evaluatively, but nevertheless by some. What role does Carter's addition of the word 'often' play in determining whether a concept is non-essentially evaluative or purely descriptive? For instance, some, but perhaps not most, adhere to the stance that being homosexual is ethically wrong. Although homosexuality primarily expresses a certain feature of a person, the concept does invoke negative evaluation within, for instance, certain religious ethical perspectives, and is in that context non-essentially evaluative. Another example is that of the term 'mother', which seems purely descriptive, since the concept it denotes merely expresses the idea of a woman who has children. However, according to the doctrine of anti-natalism, procreation is wrong, for example due to the harm future children may bring to the environment (see for instance Benatar, 2015). Within the anti-natalist perspective, 'mother' can denote a non-essentially evaluative concept. However, the concept is not used that way *often*.

On the other hand, the terms 'equality' and 'inequality' denote concepts that also describe certain situations, but are used evaluatively by many. However, I can imagine ethical theories in which these terms do not denote such non-essentially evaluative concepts. Consider the following account of a concept of a minimal state: 'A minimal state is one that secures equality by law, while not actively changing inequalities of natural endowments and social background.' From the perspective of one who is not evaluatively triggered by the terms 'equality' and 'inequalities', the definition is purely descriptive. It merely expresses the idea of a kind of minimal state. Equality by law refers to the way in which all people are treated by law, while inequalities refers to the way in which people are not similar in certain aspects, in this case their physical condition, talents, or for instance the wealth in which they grow up. Within an ethical perspective that does not evaluates any of these situations as either right or wrong, but just as given facts, and simultaneously adheres to a certain minimal protection of liberty rights for all, the above definition does not express any evaluative concepts, and as such is value-free.

In other words, terms such as 'inequality' and 'mother' denote purely descriptive concepts for some, but non-essentially evaluative concepts for others. So why does Carter mention that it is characteristic for non-essentially evaluative concepts that they are descriptive but *often* used evaluatively, which therefore includes 'inequality' but excludes 'mother'? I suggest Carter writes the word 'often' for the reason that it enables him to illustrate more clearly what kind of concepts *usually* fall into this category. His most essential claim remains the following: "Where we draw the line between concepts that are used evaluatively and

concepts that are not, will depend on the particular substantive ethical theory in question" (2015: 292).

3.5 The usefulness of Steiner's value-free concept

To summarize, a definition denotes a value-free concept when its relevant terms do not denote concepts the use of which expresses either essential or non-essential evaluation, whereby establishing the latter depends on the ethical perspective of the user. According to Carter, "once we see more precisely how value-free concepts are distinguished from non-value-free concepts within a particular ethical perspective, we shall also see the important role that the former can and should play in ethical theorizing" (2015: 287). In contrast to non-value-free concepts that are defined in terms of other ethical concepts or values, a value-free concept is defined purely in empirical terms. Through directly pointing at certain observable phenomena in the world, this last evaluative element sets into motion a chain of reasons that ascends all the way to the top of the dome.

In what way does Steiner's value-free concept of freedom ground his ethical theory? The definition must be able to *clearly* point at the relevant observable phenomena, in order for that ethical theory to be properly grounded in the empirical.

However, although the terms within his definition do not denote evaluative terms, some of them need more clarification. For instance, what does it mean for an action to be rendered *impossible*? Steiner elaborates the specific implications of his concept of freedom extensively in his further work. With 'impossibly rendered actions' he means those actions that one cannot possibly perform as a consequence of a human action that "either (i) does occur, or (ii), would occur if the former were attempted" (1994: 8). Thus, imagine for instance a crazy bank robber that angrily shouts "If you flee, I shoot you in the face!", while frantically waving his gun. While one can hope that he will not shoot the employee if she continues laying down on the floor, the chances are very high that he would shoot her if she attempted to flee. Therefore, he renders her possible future action of escaping impossible. Although she may *choose* to flee, thus rendering that action eligible, completing that action would not be possible.

But how is one supposed to know with *certainty* whether this possible action of fleeing will eventually be rendered impossible? What if, despite the high probability of this action's occurrence, the robber does not shoot, perhaps due to a mosquito flying into his right eye, and the employee succeeds in fleeing? Is she free or unfree while lying on the floor? Perhaps a high probability is enough to say that she is unfree, but when is the occurrence of such a preventing action probable enough? These questions seem problematic for the claimed usefulness of Steiner's value-free concept. If it supposedly forms a bridge between the empirical properties that initiate a theory's reason-giving and the further evaluative properties, it must *directly* point at those empirical properties. However, considering his understanding of

‘rendering impossible’, it also seems to point at those empirical properties that *do not yet exist*, and might never exist. Can a value-free concept be useful if it contains such uncertainties?

One might say that Steiner's definition does not pick out these possible empirical properties, but those that show the high probability of their occurrence. Thus, the observable facts that the robber is not right in his mind, has a loaded gun, and crazily screams that he will shoot anyone who attempts to flee, are the observable phenomena to which Steiner’s definition refers. Still, such empirical properties do not necessitate the occurrence of a constraining action. However, I would suggest that Steiner’s thorough elaboration of the exact empirical properties he has in mind, and which observable phenomena count as instances of unfreedom, are very useful in grounding his ethical theory.

3.6 Conclusion

In the previous I established the value-freeness of Steiner’s concept of freedom, by examining whether the relevant terms in his definition indeed merely denote purely descriptive concepts. I suggested that Carter caused a minor confusion with his idea of how to establish a non-essentially evaluative concept, but showed that eventually, the prime criterion is whether such a concept serves evaluatively from the perspective of the user. Finally, although Steiner’s concept seems to ground his ethical theory in picking out those observable phenomena that initiate his theory’s reason-giving, I posed that his definition refers to unclear or not-yet existing empirical properties. But considering his further extensive elaboration on his empirical definition, his purely descriptive concept of freedom does seem to clearly ground his ethical theory. However, since the way in which Steiner uses his concept implies the superiority of his own ethical theory, it is not value-neutral. In what follows I examine a political concept that is both value-free and value-neutral, namely the social concept of freedom provided by Oppenheim.

4 Normative value-neutrality: Oppenheim and social freedom

"Value-neutrality: a concept is value-neutral if its *use* does not imply the *superiority* of any one of a set of contrasting substantive ethical points of view." (Carter, p.285, italics added)

4.1 Introduction

While value-free concepts serve in providing an empirical basis for the particular ethical theory they are part of, Carter proposes that value-neutral concepts are useful because they generate a common ground between multiple ethical perspectives. Pursuing value-neutrality, says Carter, can thus be motivated by the normative purpose of seeking ethical values on which conflicting normative theories agree. I aim to show that Carter is right to claim that such concepts are possible and useful. First, I elaborate on the general meaning of normative value-neutral concepts, and show why these can be both value-free and non-value-free (4.2). To further illustrate and explain normative value-neutrality I use Carter's example of Oppenheim's account of social freedom (4.3). I subsequently ask whether his concept really does not imply the superiority of a certain ethical theory (4.4).

4.2 Normative value-neutrality

To recall, value-neutrality concerns a concept the use of which does not presuppose a preference over any of a certain set of contrasting ethical theories. Determining value-neutrality is thus not based upon the absence or presence of certain terms in the relevant definition, but the way in which the concept in question is *used* in a certain *context*, and what set of contrasting ethical theories is involved. Therefore, in some contexts a concept may be affirmed as being value-neutral, while in others it is not value-neutral.

Accordingly, value-neutrality exists in different degrees. The more ethical theories one aims to capture within a concept while staying neutral between these, the less ethically contested the included ideas should be. One way of achieving such largely value-neutral concepts is by abstracting from these theories as much as possible, in order to avoid ethical disagreement. A more limited scope of neutrality is one that aims to construct a commonly shared concept for a specific set of ethical theories. One may include ethical values in such a concept, thereby locating it a bit higher in the hierarchy of that shared ethical theory. However, one can also make it value-free, thereby constructing a grounding concept that serves as the last evaluative element of a shared ethical theory (Carter, 2015: 285-304).

In the following, I examine Oppenheim's concept of social freedom, to which Carter refers as being both value-free and value-neutral. Oppenheim sought a concept of freedom that could count on broad agreement within the social sciences. Social scientists, he says,

need a common vocabulary about freedom in order to properly assess their empirical data, independent of further ethical theories such theorists might hold about freedom (1961: 5). Just as scientists use a concept like gravity or time to be able to refer to certain empirical properties, for instance falling objects, one might say that social scientists need an empirically defined concept of freedom to be able to refer to certain actions of people and their implications for other people's actions. As Oppenheim states: "It is precisely because political science includes value judgments that its key concepts must be defined in nonvaluational terms. (...) I want to lay the groundwork for an understanding of the valuational as well as of the empirical aspects of freedom - its presence and absence." (1961: 9). Oppenheim hopes that his kind of social freedom enables us to comprehend the way in which we evaluate situations in which our actions may be constrained.

4.3 Empirical definition of social freedom

Oppenheim thinks that even though freedom is a political concept which often has evaluative connotations, most have a shared, basic empirical understanding of it (1961: 7). By examining the way in which people generally use the term 'freedom' and related terms such as 'unfree' and 'power', Oppenheim's aim is similar to that of the logical positivists (Carter, 2015: 286). Oppenheim calls his concept *social* freedom, since it refers to social relations between people, or 'relationships of interaction' (1961: 4). He defines social freedom as follows:

> "Wrt [with respect to] P (a holder of power), R (a respondent) is *unfree* to do X if and only if P makes it either impossible or punishable for R to do X." (Oppenheim, 1995, p.404, italics added)

Oppenheim states that his concept of social freedom is a kind of negative freedom, since it expresses what it means to be *unfree*. Although he claims that he not necessarily adheres to negative rather than positive freedom, he does think that people most essentially refer to freedom in this way (1995: 404).

According to Carter, Oppenheim's account of freedom is, just as Steiner's, value-free (2015: 294). Thus, the relevant terms of the definition do not denote essentially or non-essentially evaluative concepts. 'Punishable' is a term that refers to the act of punishing, which may be evaluated positively, but also negatively. Just as the terms 'prevented' and 'rendering impossible' in Steiner's definition, 'punishable' needs context in order for one to decide whether that particular act of punishing is right or wrong. However, similarly to the criticism concerning Steiner's use of the concept of rendering impossible, one may say that making an action punishable does not necessarily always amount to unfreedom. For instance, ignoring a red sign is punishable, but it might be the case that due to a broken police camera, I am not

punished for it. But, just as Steiner, Oppenheim extensively elaborates on his definition and thereby clearly shows which observable phenomena he counts as amounting to unfreedom.

Thus, having established its value-freeness, the question now is in what way Oppenheim's concept is value-neutral as well. While Steiner's concept is value-free but not value-neutral, since he uses it to ground his own particular ethical theory, Oppenheim thought his concept would be useful as an objective tool for assessing data in social sciences, namely without evaluating that which happens in the world. As such, the use of Oppenheim's concept in social sciences allegedly leaves room for quite diverging ethical theories, such as libertarian and socialist ones. These may determine whether the posed concept of social freedom is valuable or not, and what its practical use implications should be. For instance, while some may think it is always wrong to make a certain action impossible or punishable, others may argue there are specific cases in which it is right. Being free or unfree as empirically defined through Oppenheim's concept of social freedom may invoke different ethical evaluations.

However, since Oppenheim specifically picks out certain empirical properties to define social freedom, it seems that he does adhere to *some* kind of theory about freedom. Just as Steiner, he is defining his concept based on a certain intuition, although Oppenheim claims that he derives his idea about what freedom entails from observing how people generally talk about freedom in daily language. In what way, then, is his concept value-neutral within the context of social science?

4.4 Neutral with regard to a set of ethical theories

According to Carter, a value-free concept "can be used in given *contexts* without implying the *speaker's* allegiance to one or another member of a set of substantive ethical points of view." (2015: 286, italics added). A context here seems to mean a kind of discourse, in which a certain set of substantive ethical perspectives play a part. Thus, in this case a speaker is someone who, while for instance adhering to a specific ethical perspective, is able to use the concept of social freedom without implying the superiority of one's own perspective. This value-free concept therefore enables those with a different ethical perspective to talk about freedom without disagreeing which empirical properties ground it.

However, certain social scientists might have a different idea concerning which empirical properties should be referred to in defining freedom. For instance, Steiner does not think that the probability of an action being punished amounts to unfreedom. Oppenheim's empirical definition may be adhered to by multiple otherwise diverging ethical theories, thereby generating a high degree of agreement on the empirical level of these theories, but ethical theories that pick out other empirical properties to ground freedom are left out. Therefore, affirming Oppenheim's concept as being value-neutral ignores the fact that this is only true

with regard to those theories that already adhere to the concept. Calling the concept value-neutral seems misleading.

But to recall, according to Carter the point of a value-neutral concept is not that it is neutral with regard to *all* possible sets of ethical theories, but only with regard to that set in the context in which it is used. As such, it creates a common ground for these ethical theories, and reveals on which values they agree. Indeed, some thinkers might not embrace Oppenheim's negative concept of social freedom. But he seems quite successful in generating an account of freedom that is both defined in empirical terms, which is useful for social scientists to assess their empirical data, and one that resonates in a set of mostly liberal but nevertheless diverging ethical theories. Still, the term 'value-neutral' might better be replaced by for instance 'partly-neutral'.

A remaining criticism one may have against Oppenheim is that in constructing a specific negative concept of freedom that he thinks social sciences need and should use, he is pressing his own ethical theory. He himself even criticizes such an implicit ethical agenda when he says that "restricting 'freedom' by definition to doing, or being permitted to do, what one desires is usually a disguise for advocating that people should be left free to make their own decisions in some specific area." (2004: 197). By suggesting that the relevant kind of freedom in social and political sciences is grounded only in certain empirical properties, which point at a kind of negative freedom, Oppenheim disregards other possible empirical definitions of freedom. But again, according to Carter a value-neutral concept cannot concern *all* conceivable sets of substantive ethical perspectives. Although some may concern many and extremely diverging ethical theories, other value-neutral concepts may be quite limited in their degree of value-neutrality, albeit still proving their usefulness within that small set of slightly diverging ethical theories.

4.5 Conclusion

Oppenheim's proposed concept of social freedom reveals the adherents of a variety of mostly liberal ethical theories what kind of empirical freedom they essentially adhere to, and subsequently at what point their interpretation or further use of that concept diverges. For Oppenheim, the use of this concept is within the social sciences, but it also seems useful in clarifying the empirical properties that these theories pick out as grounding their reason-giving.

To what extent, however, is it possible to create common ground for a *very large* set of ethical perspectives? In the following, I clarify a highly abstract concept of freedom as proposed by MacCallum (1961), and inquire into its usefulness for the meta-theoretical aim of gaining a more general and even fundamental insight into what it is human beings mean with and value about freedom.

5 Meta-theoretical value-neutrality: MacCallum and abstract freedom

"At its most ambitious, it might even be to say something interesting about "the human condition"."
(Carter, 2015: 300)

5.1 Introduction

In the previous, I examined Carter's notions of value-freeness and normative value-neutrality. I answered the question whether such concepts are useful in normative theorizing in the affirmative. Some can help existing ethical theories see in which way they share a certain concept, such as Oppenheim's social freedom, and others show in which way a particular theory links to the empirical, such as Steiner's kind of negative freedom. However, Carter suggests that some value-neutral concepts are especially useful in meta-theoretical theorizing, namely for their insights into more abstract and general ideas that a broad range of different ethical theories may share. To illustrate this kind of ethical detachment, Carter depicts MacCallum's abstract account of freedom, which reveals a basic conceptual structure that allegedly grounds most interpretations of freedom. The most ambitious aim of such a meta-theoretical value-neutral concept, says Carter, is to shed light on certain essential features of the human condition (2015: 300). In order to find out what kind of insight he has in mind, and in what way a value-neutral concept can contribute to such an insight, I now examine MacCallum's abstract concept of freedom.

First, I elaborate in which way Carter views this concept as value-neutral. According to him, although positive and negative freedom are distinct concepts, these use the same conceptual structure that MacCallum (1961) proposes and therefore merely interpret the latter differently (5.2). I then pose a criticism posed by K. Flikschuh (2007), concerning the possibility of capturing such contrasting concepts into one definition, caused by the conceptual indeterminacy of FREEDOM. She thinks that MacCallum abstracts too much from the substantive ethical debate to contribute to that debate (5.4). However, I propose that MacCallum's concept of freedom, in combination with other ideas about the value of freedom, can truly shed light on the general meaning of freedom for human beings (5.5). Finally, I examine why such an insight into freedom can still not generate an *absolutely* value-neutral concept, as Carter claims. I suggest, however, that absolute value-neutrality and therefore value-independence concerning freedom is possible, but indeed not in the way Carter understands these notions (5.6).

5.2 Freedom as a triadic relation

Carter (2015) argues that MacCallum's concept is to an extremely large extent value-neutral because it abstracts from most, if not all, ethical perspectives on freedom. The definition is as follows:

> "Whenever the freedom of some agent or agents is in question, it is always freedom from some constraint or restriction on, interference with, or barrier to doing, not doing, becoming, or not becoming something." (MacCallum, 1967: 314)

MacCallum (1967) refers to freedom as a 'triadic relation', since it is always about an (i) agent X, (ii) a preventing condition Y, and (iii) an action Z (1967: 314). According to him, Berlin (1958) is wrong to make a distinction between two fundamentally distinct concepts of freedom. In MacCallum's view, positive and negative freedom are both grounded in the same basic conceptual structure that all, albeit perhaps unknowingly, use when talking about an agent's freedom. MacCallum argues that the distinction between 'freedom to', which many link to positive freedom, and 'freedom from', which supposedly signifies a kind of negative freedom, can "serve only to emphasize one or the other of two features of *every* case of the freedom of agents." (1967: 318). First, one is free *from* something; second, this enables him *to do* something else. These two statements are necessarily linked in any statement about being free or unfree. For instance, being free from hunger means that one is free *from* certain constraints, which subsequently enables one *to* eliminate or prevent one's hunger (1967: 316-318).

Therefore, those who claim that there is a relevant difference between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', just emphasize different parts of "what is always present in any case of freedom" (1967: 318). Libertarians mostly value that people are not physically constrained, and therefore use the first part of the definition, while certain socialists think that people should primarily be able to fulfill their wants and desires, and therefore point out the latter part. MacCallum aims to show both parties why freedom seen as a triadic relation grounds all these different instances of freedom. Since his concept does not show a preference over one or the other interpretation, it is neutral with regard to that set of possible ethical theories. Thus, following Carter, the concept indeed seems to be highly value-neutral.

As such, these different ethical perspectives are not *substantively* disagreeing about this basic conceptual structure of freedom. Carter thinks these perspectives merely fill in the variables of the definition differently, thereby interpreting it in a certain way (2015: 301). For instance, M. Rothbard (1974) thinks that only something that is physically and humanly imposed counts as constraining freedom, and Steiner (1994) that such a constraint refers to a human action that makes another action impossible, but T. Green (1986) argues that both

external human actions and internal restraints, such as irrational passions, count as constraints on freedom. All use the idea of "freedom as a triadic relation between an agent, constraints, and doings or becomings" (2015: 299), but have different ideas about what counts as an agent, a constraint and doings or becomings within this concept.

Would they disagree about what the defining terms 'agent', 'action' and 'constraint' mean *in general*, these thinkers would have a "genuinely substantive disagreement" (2015: 302). For instance, while some may think that any movement of a human being counts as an action, many seem to link an action to intentionality. Accordingly, J. Elster (1985) claims that one can only call certain behavior an action if the person in question intended to perform this behavior (60). Thus, aside from having a different idea concerning which actions amount to unfreedom, contrasting perspectives may dispute what counts as an action in general. Choosing sides in such a dispute influences the kind of interpretations that subsequently can follow from MacCallum's abstract concept. Diverging perspectives arising from genuine substantive disagreement about general terms in a definition are *conceptions* of the denoted concept (2015: 301-302).

Carter thinks that MacCallum's abstract concept of freedom does not invoke many genuine substantive disagreements or controversial questions, since the terms in the definition are not highly specified. MacCallum's concept thus identifies shared abstract properties from a broad range of diverging concepts of freedom that are located at different locations in the ethical theory they are part of. Some of them may be at the ground and therefore value-free, such as that of Steiner and Oppenheim. Others may be defined in evaluative terms. Therefore, MacCallum's concept is also "neutral between value-free and non-value-free definitions" (Carter: 300).

In other words, Carter is right to claim that MacCallum's abstract concept of freedom is highly value-neutral, and useful through revealing the abstract common ground that even extremely diverging ethical perspectives share. It shows what kind of conceptual structure is behind the way human beings usually think and talk about freedom, while not implying the superiority of any of the possible interpretations. As such, the concept reveals an abstract area "of intersection between contrasting grounding networks" (2015: 296).

5.3 Too large an abstraction

However, in being located at a very abstract level, capturing many perspectives on freedom, MacCallum's concept of freedom seems unable to clarify ethical disputes on more specific levels. Although Carter emphasizes that the concept is especially useful for meta-theoretical theorizing, its insight may seem uninteresting for those thinkers that primary participate in ethical debates about freedom. Moreover, the idea that positive and negative freedom depict

different concepts of freedom seems to resonate clearly in current moral and political debate - especially because they imply quite contrasting policies.

For instance, since M. Rothbard (1974) thinks only a humanly imposed physical constrained on one's actual action counts as a constraint that amounts to unfreedom, he favors a kind of anarchist society in which no government may interfere with people's life (p…). In contrast, although Green (1986) agrees that our basic understanding of freedom is about the absence of constraints, he claims that the latter includes internal restraints. As such, a person can be unfree if he is unable to act upon what his 'real self' wants to do, for instance due to certain cravings or irrational impulses (309-310). Eventually, adhering to Green's view amounts to allowing a government to enhance people's freedom by reducing the influence of such internal cravings or impulses, for instance through limiting or even banning alcohol consumption (Gaus, 2000: 87).

Compared with Rothbard's view on freedom, Green's idea implies an extremely different kind of policy. Even though they do not substantively disagree the same conceptual structure that MacCallum proposes, they eventually do not seem to be talking about the same thing. Therefore, Flikschuh (2007) suggests that although MacCallum's abstract concept contributed in bringing clarity into the substantive debate on freedom, he might have abstracted too much from that debate.

5.4 The indeterminateness of FREEDOM

Flikschuh states that MacCallum's conceptual analysis enabled him to inquire freedom in an ethically detached way, and "lays bare the necessary and sufficient constitutive components of the 'pure' concept" FREEDOM (2007: 38). She thinks that there is indeed such a basic concept that gives rise to different interpretations. As such, FREEDOM is similar to the concept CHAIR, which consists of multiple forms, such as armchair or wheelchair, that share the essential structural features of the general idea CHAIR. It would be strange to state certain chairs are so completely different that they do not share any fundamental features of the basic concept CHAIR (2007: 40). Accordingly, different interpretations of FREEDOM must share certain essential features. As mentioned, this belief in the existence of a true meaning of concepts, including political ones, resonates in the Socratic tradition (Gaus, 2000: 3-7).

However, Flikschuh (2007) thinks that this idea does not necessarily imply that one can capture such a concept through a single definition - which Wittgenstein thought is impossible (2013: sect. 67). A political concept such as FREEDOM is too complex for that purpose, since interpretations consist of ethical values. Flikschuh suggests interpreting Berlin (1957) not as claiming that there are two fundamentally distinct concepts of freedom, but that the basic concept FREEDOM is essentially contested and therefore gives rise to diverging ethical perspectives. In contrast to an empirical concept such as CHAIR, the political concept FREEDOM

refers both to more or less determinate empirical properties, and to indeterminate evaluative properties. The importance and meaning of FREEDOM are continuously subject to change through substantial ethical disagreements. In other words, FREEDOM is and will always be much disputed, and trying to capture its indeterminate conceptual structure through a certain abstract definition is an impossible pursuit. Although MacCallum's account "provides the basic material which philosophical analysis gets to work on" (41), it does not provide further aid in clearing up ethical confusions about FREEDOM (2007: 39-41).

Thus, it seems that thinkers such as Flikschuh, Wittgenstein and Berlin are not convinced about the usefulness of a highly abstract political concept. However, what might impress them is the possibility that the value-neutral concept MacCallum shows certain essential features of the human condition, as Carter suggests. It may clarify the "ethical categories shared (…) by all humans", which is its most ambitious, meta-theoretical aim (2015: 304). To what extent can MacCallum's concept contribute in such a pursuit?

5.5 Freedom as non-specifically valuable

In order to investigate based on MacCallum's concept what kind of ethical category all human beings may share, I suggest to consider the intuitively appealing idea that in general, human beings *value* freedom. Connolly (1983) argues for this idea by showing that using terms such as 'free' and 'freedom' in daily language essentially expresses positive evaluation. 'Free' is not merely valuable in the eyes of the beholder, but is *itself* a positive notion. This shows, says Connolly, through the linguistic difference between the terms 'free' and 'less'. For example, while living 'carefree' denotes a positive idea, living 'careless' invokes negative evaluation. Most words carrying the term 'free' show that one cannot strip it of its attached positive value, which "flows from its identification of factors pertinent to well-being." (1983: 143). If it is true that human beings usually use the term 'free' as referring to something normatively positive, the abstract account of freedom that MacCallum (1967) endorses must link to something we consider a good thing.

Carter (1995) further substantiates this idea by claiming that human beings value freedom independently of the particular things it allows us to do. He contrasts his argument with that of Dworkin (1979), who argues that human beings only value the particular kinds of freedom that are instrumental in pursuing their goals (1995: 820). However, says Carter, human beings often do not know what their future or even current values and goals are and will be. Therefore, it is for them not evident right now which particular freedom they need to achieve those ends. Just as many value money because of its probable future use in buying things such as food or shelter, human beings pursue a kind of general state of freedom that makes more certain the possibility of achieving future goals (1995: 832).

According to Carter, human beings show to prefer larger choice sets to having only few options. Even though enormous amounts of possible choices might generate stress, human beings generally strive for a state of being in which they have more options rather than less. Similarly, although the non-specifically valued freedom does not necessarily itself generate happiness, human beings rather have more of it than less (1995: 830). They recognize that they need a certain extent of freedom to achieve the particular things that make them happy, whatever these things are or will be (1995: 834).

The combined ideas of freedom as being a positive notion, non-specifically valued, and a triadic relation, seem to reveal a most basic human pursuit: a state of being in which one is as less constrained as possible in order to achieve future goals. One might notice that this observation strongly implies that human beings essentially value a kind of positive freedom, a state of being that enables one to satisfy future goals, and as such encourages one to decrease all constraints that might hinder one in the future, such as not having enough money or a low social status. Perhaps negative freedom as free *from* constraints is most essential to how we talk and think about freedom, as Steiner and Oppenheim suggest, but the reason we *value* being free is that such a state of being enables us *to do* things and achieve future goals, as Carter suggests.

These observations about the way in which human beings talk about and value freedom, including MacCallum's concept, together form an idea that abstracts from many different interpretations of what particular things freedom allows us to do. Meanwhile, that idea does not presuppose which particular things freedom *should* allow us to do, and does not, based on the idea that human beings generally value freedom, imply an ethical theory that prescribes the enlargement of people's freedom. The above inquiry merely sheds light on how human beings essentially regard the idea of being free, thereby having reached a high level of value-neutrality – perhaps even absolute value-neutrality. However, Carter says the latter perspective is impossible. Why does he assume this, and how does it relate to the above observations?

5.6 The possibility of transcending the moral realm

In line with Carter, Dworkin argues that complete value-independence, which is needed for absolute value-neutrality, is impossible. According to Dworkin, claiming that one can say something general and ethically detached about a political concept by transcending the moral realm amounts to ethically choose sides in a debate on the truth- or falsehood of moral claims. As mentioned, he calls those who pursue value-independence archimedeans, people who think morality can do without moral foundations. However, says Dworkin, even making a claim about a political concept from a seemingly neutral and observant perspective, which Oppenheim thought being capable of, inevitably adheres to a certain moral claim (1989: 89).

For instance, claiming that genocide is wicked because people show a disapproving reaction in thinking and talking about genocide amounts, says Dworkin, to saying that if people "ceased to react in that way to genocide, genocide would cease to be wicked." (102). In the same sense, claiming that freedom is valuable non-specifically because people react positively to such a state of being and actively pursue it, amounts to saying that if people did not react and behave as such, freedom would cease have non-specific value. Thus, justifying the meaning or significance of an idea "purely in terms of theoretical-explanatory considerations" (Carter, 2015: 285), namely through an observation of people's behavior, amounts to the claim that morality only exists in virtue of the occurrence of those observations. This is itself a moral claim about whether there is a moral reality or whether it is rather humanly constructed.

In other words, if people were stoically in an absolute sense, nothing would be either wrong or right, and all moral claims false. Such a perspective links to the moral error theory, that broadly states that moral propositions are false since there is no moral reality. Without going into both positions too much, it seems that indeed, one is choosing sides in claiming that it is possible to say something general in a value-independent way about an ethical idea such as freedom.

However, I would argue that making a statement about the way in which human beings generally regard and value freedom does not amount to a claim about the existence of moral reality. It is just to say that through observing people's reactions, talk and ethical theories one is able to say something general about what people *appear* to value - whether this corresponds with real moral truths or rather with their own constructed morality. Thus, claiming that human beings generally pursue a state of being in which they are free from constraints and as such are able to achieve possible future goals, is not an ethically loaded claim, or even to a lesser extent normative or prescriptive.

But to recall, Carter defines value-neutrality and value-independence in terms of the way in which a *concept* is *used.* Is a belief of how human beings generally think and talk about freedom the same as a concept? I think that *using* MacCallum's concept, perhaps combined with the idea of freedom as a positive notion and as non-specifically valuable, as a way of showing the conceptual structure that people generally adhere to when talking about freedom, itself does not imply a claim about the moral nature of freedom. But what I think Carter has in mind when referring to a *concept* is an idea of which one assumes its truth, and therefore imply a certain claim. Concerning MacCallum's concept, it is a claim that freedom *should* be understood as a triadic relation. With regard to Carter's idea it is the claim that freedom has a non-specific value. These claims amount to choosing sides in certain debates about the nature of morality. However, I would still argue that the observations about how people in general

regard freedom, are quite interesting for those who wish to understand human beings without making any ethical claims.

5.7 Conclusion

MacCallum's concept of freedom as a triadic relation proves highly value-neutral, since it captures a broad range of diverging ethical theories on freedom without implying the superiorly of any of them. In abstracting from many interpretations, it reveals a shared conceptual structure that all use when talking about freedom, even though these diverging interpretations may have quite contrasting implications for policies. The latter, however, gives rise to a criticism with regard to the usefulness of MacCallum's concept in clarifying ethical disputes at more specific levels, and suggests that the basic concept FREEDOM cannot, due to its indeterminateness, be captures in a single definition. However, MacCallum's concept may contribute to the more ambitious aim of saying something general about which understanding of freedom all human beings share. Combining his suggestion of freedom as a triadic relation with the observation that people generally regard freedom as an essentially positive notion and as non-specific valuable, poses an interesting insight into the way in which human beings generally regard freedom. However, since I am in this context merely using these ideas as descriptions of what human beings appear to think and value about freedom, they do not form a distinct concept that implies certain ethical claims. Although the inquiry gives interesting insights, it does not fulfill Carter's proposed meta-theoretical aim of saying something general about what freedom means in relation to the human condition, at least not through a definite claim.

6 Conclusion

The meaning and nature of freedom is much disputed, but in providing concepts that are value-free or to a certain extent value-neutral, philosophers can clarify existing ethical theories and reveal certain general conceptual structures used in daily talk about freedom. Carter gives an original insight in the way in which thinkers can construct and recognize such ethically detached accounts of freedom. Through his metaphor of ethical theories as constructed like traditional domes that are grounded in the empirical, he shows in which way the conflict about whether either all political concepts are ethically loaded or whether some can be ethically detached overlooks the possibility that complete value-independence is not the only kind of ethical detachment. Carter proposes two other notions, namely value-freeness and value-neutrality. In clarifying his view on the structure of ethical theories, and subsequently his idea of value-free and value-neutral concepts, I attempted to show why Carter thinks that these are both possible and useful in different ways, and in which ways his argument might be contested.

6.1 Value-freeness

According to Carter, in defining certain concepts purely in empirical terms, one can show which empirical properties link to the last evaluative element of a particular or shared ethical theory. Steiner's concept identified those observable phenomena that he thinks essentially point to instances of unfreedom, based on a fundamental intuition that one is free to do what one actually does. The definition of this concept does not contain evaluative terms, establishing its value-freeness. It is in this context used particularly to ground Steiner's ethical theory, and is therefore not value-neutral.

I suggested three criticisms concerning Carter's proposal of value-freeness. First, I suggest that his distinction between non-essentially evaluative terms and purely descriptive terms is unclear. He assumes that determining whether a term is non-essentially evaluative depends both on how often people use it as such, and on the specific ethical stance of the individual user. However, I interpret that he primarily means the latter as a criterion for whether a concept is value-free or not, since the significance of a value-free concept is that it grounds one's particular ethical theory. The second point is that referring to empirically defined concepts as being value-free, might cause confusion about the nature of that concept. Since the concept itself is ethically loaded, as part of an ethical theory, only the definition is value-free. Finally, I posed that Steiner's value-free concept gives rise to uncertainty, since he refers to empirical properties in his definition that might not actually lead to a constraint of one's actions, despite the high probability of that occurrence. I therefore proposed that Carter might

have to sharpen the criteria of the kind of empirical properties that can ground one's ethical theory.

6.2 Normative value-neutrality

As Carter suggests, it is possible to provide accounts of freedom on which otherwise contrasting ethical theories agree, without that account implying a preference for any of that set of theories. The set of ethical theories that share an understanding of such a value-neutral concept can vary in range.

In line with Carter, I think that such value-neutral concepts are useful in normative theorizing. By constructing a common ground, they show where contrasting ethical theories overlap, and clarify at what point their interpretation diverges. As such, it enables disagreeing theorists to have a more open and clear debate. Moreover, an empirically defined value-neutral concept such as that of Oppenheim has a high chance to be accepted on a large scale in social sciences. Although I suggested that Oppenheim's concept of social freedom excludes other empirical definitions of freedom, and therefore that using it in supposedly objective sciences seems dubious, his concept abstracts from a broad range of normative theories and as such remains useful in that specific context.

However, similarly to value-free concepts, it seems misleading to call concepts value-neutral while simultaneously refuting the possibility of absolute value-neutrality. Value-neutral concepts are only neutral with respect to a certain set of ethical theories, excluding other theories from their concern. Therefore, I suggest referring to such concepts in a way that incorporates the idea that absolute value-neutrality is impossible.

6.3 Meta-theoretical value-neutrality

Carter's proposal that highly value-neutral concepts can provide a more general insight into the ethical categories that human beings share seems right with regard to MacCallum's abstract account of freedom as a triadic relation. In using general terms that do not invoke much genuine substantive disagreement, it successfully reveals a commonly shared abstract conceptual structure that grounds most interpretations of freedom.

However, it does not provide practical guidance, as normative theorists mostly wish to gain from insights into political concepts such as freedom. Moreover, MacCallum's concept might abstract too much from the ethical debate about freedom, therefore not clarifying these disagreements on more specific levels. Although these criticisms are sensible, I argued that pursuing a high degree of value-neutrality is still illuminating. In combination with two other ideas about the way in which people generally regard and value freedom, one can make the interesting observation that although freedom from constraints might be necessary for the general state of being free, human beings seem to value freedom mostly because it enables

them to achieve future goals. This idea does not imply the claim that human beings indeed all value freedom as such, or that they should, and therefore does not imply an ethical theory. In that sense, it is absolutely value-neutral or value-independent, but not in terms of Carter's definition of value-independent concepts.

6.4 Final remark

I conclude that with his view on the possibility of kinds of ethical detachment, and his arguments for why philosophers should pursue such value-free and value-neutral concepts, Carter has given an original insight into the debate on the nature of political concepts such as freedom. Aside from a few suggestions that might improve his theory, I think value-free and value-neutral concepts are a worthwhile pursuit both for philosophers that participate in normative theorizing and for those that pursue conceptual analysis, especially for meta-theoretical purposes. As such, Carter provides room for further investigation into the nature of political concepts and ethical theories.

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