

Determination from Above

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Abstract

There are many historical concerns about freedom that have come to be deemphasized in the free will literature itself—for instance, worries around the tyranny of government or the alienation of capitalism. It is hard to see how the current free will literature respects these, or indeed how they could even find expression. This paper seeks to show how these and other concerns can be reintegrated into the debate by appealing to a levels ontology. Recently, Christian List and others have considered how the notion of levels could be relevant to the free will debate. Invariably, however, the focus is on the significance of facts at lower levels. The threats come *from below*, from fundamental physics or neuroscience. Here, I aim to show how we can frame many interesting concerns about free will in terms of threats *from above*. After arguing that determination from above is no less threatening, I catalogue such concerns that might constitute threats to our freedom. Doing this not only allows us to show how these concerns relate to those standardly discussed, but it pushes us to expand our conception of freedom.

“The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above.”

Adorno & Rabinbach (1975, p. 12)

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1 | INTRODUCTION

As the literature on freedom of the will has evolved, the sources of our anxiety about our freedom have focused growingly on domains like physics or neuroscience. We worry whether physics is genuinely deterministic, or whether neuroscience can show that the decisions ‘we’ make are *actually* made within our brains before ‘we’ consciously settle on them. These are reasonable concerns. Still, naively coming to the literature, one might be surprised to see a lack of emphasis on challenges to our freedom stemming from the political, economic, or social domains—areas where we are more likely in our everyday lives to feel squeezed, put upon, or constrained in our liberty. Oh, there is plenty written on these topics. And it is often written about under the guise of discussing our freedom or autonomy. But it has not quite been present in the recent decades in the free will literature, and it’s entirely unclear how what is written on these topics squares with that literature.¹

If we think about negative liberty, for instance, or what it takes to be free from interference by something like tyrannical authority, it is not straightforward how this sense of freedom relates to the sense of freedom under threat by the potential determinism of physics. (What good is freedom from interference when you are not free to do otherwise than you exactly will?) We could say that this concern with liberty is important, but fundamentally not a matter of genuine freedom of the will. Or we may think that there are multiple, disparate senses of freedom, each valid, and that it is a family resemblance concept. The result of these approaches may amount to much the same: a polite separation or extrication of the *proper* free will literature. Political philosophers could of course still argue that freedom is valuable only insofar as we are considering the political sense of it. But they would do so at conferences we in the free will literature do not attend and in journals we do not read.²

For all that I have to say below, this arrangement may prevail. Preferable, though, would be finding some way to express how each of these domains present situations that genuinely threaten free will, and how they relate to each other. Until recently, it might not have been so clear what could do justice to this ambition. However, I think a scientifically respectable way of articulating this can be done using the growingly popular language of *levels*.

Within the sciences, there’s an ongoing discussion about the relation between the objects of study of fields like physics, chemistry, and biology. Do the elements of chemistry reduce to the physics, or in some sense emerge out of it? Considering questions like this has led some to posit that these fields may be understood as different levels of explanation, or to perhaps be explaining the behavior of different objects modeled as at different ontological levels. There are different kinds of claims that an appeal to levels could be making, some more controversial than others. But what they collectively suggest is a hierarchical (or at least ordered) way of modeling the sciences, with physics being on the bottom, sciences studying our behavior being somewhere in the middle, and sociology, economics, and other social sciences being towards the top.

It is no innovation at this point to consider whether such a picture of the world might be relevant to questions of free will. In his 2019 book, *Why Free Will is Real*, Christian List advocates for a specific form of compatibilism entirely based on leveraging a fleshed-out conception of levels. And now several authors have considered this kind of idea. But taking on board this picture *does* afford us a way of conceptualizing the relationship between the different kinds of threats posed to freedom of the will within and outside of the free will literature. My contention is that the literature has been fixated on what we might consider threats *from below* (with how certain truths of the sciences at lower levels could undermine our free will). But we should also recognize that there may well be legitimate threats *from above*.

In this paper, I want to tease out this framing as a way of collecting and contextualizing different purported threats to free will. This will help us to introduce the threats from above, explore what makes them distinctive, and what they might have to teach us about freedom. In section 2, I will quickly review how levels are thought to operate in the sciences, and List's use of them for compatibilism. I will then make some points towards legitimizing the possibility of threats to free will stemming from higher levels. This motivates an exploration of such potential threats from above in section 3.

The ambition of this piece is primarily exploratory and taxonomical. I want to draw out interesting ideas from faraway literatures to provoke further discussion more so than to make the case for any particular threat to our freedom. Still, what is fascinating about the potential threats from above is how they quickly motivate new ways of thinking about freedom. So, in section 4, I discuss three benefits from the exploration. These threats suggest drawing out new distinctions in the literature, introducing new conceptions of freedom, and imagining how questions of freedom may apply at levels above the individual.

2 | WHY SERIOUSLY REGARD THREATS FROM ABOVE?

Fields like physics, chemistry, economics, etc. appear distinct, yet there are clearly relations of dependence between them. For example, it is plausible that biological properties supervene on chemical properties, but it is implausible that certain biological properties or processes like mitosis³ are best explained in terms of (or *just are*) certain chemical properties/processes. There has long been a discussion in science about whether all phenomena reduce to physics or whether some kind of emergence is possible.⁴ A leveled picture of the world denies this and instead accepts emergence. It additionally takes emergence to be widespread, recognizes equivalence between certain emergent phenomena (e.g., all being of the same subject matter), and moreover takes it that more emergent phenomena (and the matter of new subjects) can emerge from itself emergent phenomena. This generates the levels.⁵

Someone could reject levels by rejecting emergence. Alternatively, people could accept emergence and levels but disagree over whether levels represent genuine ontological differences or are an epistemic phenomenon concerning how things can be best explained. (For example, the question is whether mitosis is a novel process to add to our ontology, or whether it is a process that is surprising and would not have been predicted just thinking about chemistry.) However, if we accept levels, and take them to be ontologically or causally robust in some sense,⁶ then this furnishes us with the tools to say something interesting about free will.

The past few decades, there has been a positive trend of using metaphysical resources to aid in assessing free will. List (2019a, 2019b) creatively contributes to this trend by showing how a levels ontology makes space for a new form of compatibilism. The core of it involves three components. The first idea is that the thesis of determinism should be thought to be true of the world at a level.⁷ The second idea is that one level can be deterministic without all levels being deterministic. List demonstrates how an indeterministic level can supervene on a deterministic one, exhibiting what he calls 'emergent indeterminism' (2019b, p. 871). The final critical idea is that the levels at which we as agents think and act are indeterministic, as we can see through examining the sciences that best capture human agency. List argues at length that these components allow us to recognize agential possibilities even where only one physical future is possible, and so affirm our freedom regardless of determinism.

We need not evaluate List's compatibilism. We only need to accept a levels ontology and the idea that determinism is a level-specific thesis. This furnishes us with the tools to see how facts at higher levels could threaten our freedom. Still, why should we feel threatened? If List is correct, we are free regardless of determinism at levels below our actions. As long as it is possible for a deterministic level to supervene on an indeterministic level,⁸ then it again seems irrelevant to our freedom if the world at levels above our actions is deterministic. So, what justifies the present inquiry?

First, it would be important to recognize the concerns discussed below as apparent (if unsuccessful) threats to freedom of the will. At the very least, these concerns could be assimilated and collectively defanged. And, of course, List's view could be mistaken. Gebharter (2020) develops a model of determinism at a lower level that *would* entail determinism at the agential level. Birch (2020) has re-written the Consequence Argument so that it will apply to the agential level, as long as determinism is true at some level of description. Menges (forthcoming) argues that our best sciences covering our conduct presuppose an ability to do otherwise, but one that is insufficiently robust to guarantee basic desert. And Galeazzi & Rendsvig (forthcoming) press directly on the consistency of the claim that determinism is true at a lower level and the claim that the agent can be in a position to actually make either of two inconsistent events occur. There may be responses to these points, but I find them compelling, and for the moment they illustrate the continued threat of determinism.

Still, one might worry that threats from below are somehow more serious. If reality is deterministic at the *fundamental* level of physics, surely this threatens our freedom at the *less fundamental* level of agency. And, by contrast, if the level of human agency is itself *more fundamental* than what is going on at the higher levels, then surely what is going on at our level is less likely to be imperiled by what is going on above. Who cares if determinism is true at the level of sociology, if sociological facts are less fundamental than and determined by facts at the level of the individual?

If there is going to be something to this kind of thought, then it better be that physics *actually* is more fundamental than the higher levels. Is it? Priority monists take the whole of the universe to be in some sense metaphysically prior to all of its parts.⁹ If we understand this object of the universe to be the most complex object, surely the object of study of a science at the highest level,¹⁰ and if we also took this to be appropriately cashed out in some way in terms of fundamentality (Calosi, 2020), then we could say that the higher levels are more fundamental (or, at least that the highest level is fundamental). So, threats from above could be more threatening.¹¹ Alternatively, if the middle level at which we reside is fundamental (as Bernstein [2021] argues), then threats from above and below would be equally threatening (or non-threatening).

Even if we do not accept these alternative pictures of fundamentality, it's not clear how this is relevant to freedom. Fundamentality is scarcely mentioned in the free will literature. If fundamentality is relevant, it seems more important to sourcehood. It sounds concerning to say that my moving just so supervenes on and is grounded in facts about the movement of more fundamental particles, even more so if my conduct is *determined* by the movement of those particles. My conduct would then seem derivative, epiphenomenal even. So, we might really be worried that what is more fundamental *sets* or *metaphysically determines* us.

This concern about the potential epiphenomenality of our thought and action has played a much bigger role in the free will literature. It has inspired some incompatibilists to affirm our freedom by arguing that agents and/or our choices/actions are emergent phenomena (e.g., O'Connor, 2000), and so are not determined by events at lower levels.¹² Alternatively, we may take the actual causal facts involved in our agency to be grounded in other lower-level facts

without this undermining the reality of causal sequences involving agents, and we could affirm our freedom in virtue of those actual causal sequences (Sartorio, 2016, 2022).

The question here concerns the reality and significance of something like *upwards* determination.¹³ But if our sense of freedom can at least potentially be threatened by cross-level determination, then why not *downwards* determination? Accepting a leveled picture of the world already involves accepting some form of emergence. And while strong emergence is stipulated to require novelty typically cashed out in terms of efficacy,¹⁴ this is often thought to involve the possibility of *downward* causation.¹⁵ There are big questions about how downward causation could be possible given the closure of physics, but many emergentists argue that it is, myself included (Silver, 2021, pp. 7882–4). What we will see is that even the potential for downward causation can be wielded to make higher-level facts appear threatening.

We, as agents, must be able to affect the physical world. We might correspondingly get worried about how the social world and above might affect us. And these threats may be causally direct or indirect. I may be confident in my freely made choices, until I look around and see people just like me choosing just as I do. And it may additionally shake our confidence in the value or significance of our freedom when we recognize higher-level trends that subsume us, and which we cannot alter.

3 | THREATS FROM ABOVE

Let's quickly canvas the kinds of threats to our freedom primarily expressed outside of the free will literature and contextualize these concerns in terms of how they present threats to our freedom from higher levels. In several cases, but not all, this involves entertaining whether determinism might be true of a certain level. I take it that determinism poses a significant challenge to free will understood in terms of an ability to do otherwise. However, it may be that the truth of determinism per se is not necessary to threaten freedom. As we have seen, another concern in the literature is sourcehood. We want to be the origin of our actions, and this can be challenged regardless of determinism.¹⁶

We should also keep distinct the question of whether some idea is true and the question of whether its truth would undermine freedom. Some of the ideas below are quite speculative. But assessing their truth is a separate task from figuring out whether/how they constitute threats to freedom. Our task here is not to answer either question, just to bring these ideas into the conversation.

3.1 | The highest level, the Geist, and God's plan

We may as well start from the top. One might expect the highest level of nature to provide some kind of threat, but it's a bit tricky how to think about what that highest level even is. There may not be a highest level, or it may be possible that there are or could be ever more higher levels of increasingly complex phenomena (Morganti, 2009).¹⁷ And, if there is a highest level, it is unclear what the right way will be to think of science at that level of explanation.

I said casually above that if priority monism were true, then the universe itself should be thought of an object of the highest level. The thought was that if the universe is an object, then there's some reason to think it's the most complex object. And if higher levels are individuated in terms of capturing increasing levels of complexity of lower-level phenomena, then there's some

reason to think that the universe is of the highest level, and whatever science that best studies it offers explanations of the highest level. Still, it is not clear what this science would look like, and so whether it might be deterministic.

I doubt a highest-level science would be identified with *cosmology* as we currently understand it, or even eschatology. While these concern the ultimate origin and fate of the universe, these sciences as they are currently constituted don't seem to have the right kind of relationship to lower sciences. The current higher sciences that we discuss (e.g., politics or macroeconomics) bear some relationship to studied lower sciences (e.g., decision theory or microeconomics). So, if there are to be higher levels of study than this, or indeed a highest level, then we should expect its science to bear some kind of relationship to these other high levels of study.

A potential higher (or highest) level that *would* seem to bear the right kind of relations to other higher-level sciences—and thus begins the speculation—is suggested by a Hegelian understanding of history. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel takes the history of civilization to be an unfolding process, conforming not just to scientific laws but to reason itself, and this can be studied and explained. Though it has few followers within analytic philosophy today, this did begin a tradition of scholars who tried to make a science out of history, which seems to transcend other sciences. And one critical thing about this process, as Hegel understood it, was that history was viewed as clearly deterministic.

Insofar as we are skeptical of the Hegelian view of history, the topic may be more of exegetical intrigue whether it should be thought of as genuinely deterministic, and whether its truth would threaten our freedom. About this, though, I should say first that Hegel himself does affirm our freedom of the will.¹⁸ He's even been characterized as a compatibilist (Donoghue, 2021). However, it might be inappropriate to ascribe to Hegel anything like a levels ontology in the first place, since Hegel was an idealist.

Apart from Hegel, though, this may be a natural place to introduce theological concerns. Much is written about fate and the challenge to freedom it would pose. Whereas those who speak of fate or something like 'God's plan' often mean to refer to specific events determined to occur in our lives, an introduction of levels raises the question: Might talk of fate be more likely at one level or another? I can only pose the question, but I will say that I find the idea of a cosmic plan most plausible if inscribed in facts at the highest level. It is an interesting further question whether the truth of something like this would challenge our freedom.^{19,20}

3.2 | Historical materialism and oppression

Whereas a faithful Hegelian picture might be tough to square with a levels ontology, where all levels are physical in some sense, Marx and many of his followers have been willing to extend a Hegelian picture in a way that is strongly rooted in material reality. Across a number of works, Marx again presents us with a science of history—*historical materialism*.²¹ However, it is focused on the economic structure of society. People have access to certain goods and technologies (the forces of production), and this is importantly related to the kind of economic relations that obtain (the relations of production). And these relations inform the non-economic apparatus of society—its institutions and culture—which works to justify and maintain those relations.

We cannot do justice to this research program here, but we can quickly note that historical materialism is sometimes taken to be a deterministic thesis, and we can see it as deterministic in two ways. First, it is taken to be deterministic in the sense that there is an inevitability to economic progression. Certain innovations inevitably led us to capitalist modes of production. And certain

tensions inherent to capitalism (for instance, falling profits and the immiseration of the masses) will inevitably lead to its downfall.²² But historical materialism is also deterministic in the sense that much of our lives and interactions are mediated and determined by these economic structures outside of our control.

The inevitability or contingency of the rise of capitalism is a subject of intense debate, and it is separately controversial whether/how capitalism will inevitably fail. Still, I take it that the larger threat that this program produces is to our being the true source of our conduct. Marx himself was concerned with how capitalism alienates us from our labor,²³ and much of the interesting subsequent work by those in the Frankfurt School (figures like Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) was concerned with how capitalism alienates us much more generally (e.g., in terms of our relationship to art, or even facets of our own psychology). Some have even argued more recently that capitalism constrains us epistemically, making it impossible to even imagine relating to one another in ways not mediated by capitalism (Fisher, 2014).²⁴

It is tantalizing to think about what all this could mean if these ideas could be articulated rigorously by analytic philosophers. One avenue to pursue concerns the causal story on a Marxian view of economics. Marx's picture seems amenable to and evocative of a levels ontology,²⁵ but it is not obvious how a proponent should model the causal interactions between the individual and broader economic forces. Some, like Althusser, have been deeply concerned with how to think about causation on a Marxian picture and what this means (negatively) for individual freedom (Smith, 1984). But if it is correct to model our interaction with economic systems like capitalism using levels, then framing how we can be downwardly caused by capitalist structures requires appealing to the most recent treatments of causation.

Even if we are not ready to be Marxists, we can nevertheless accept the reality of oppression (whether class, racial, gendered, etc.) as a phenomenon captured at this higher level. While there are different axes of oppression prominent in different societies, few would deny the possibility of the condition of oppression. And oppression constitutes a threat to freedom.

Recently, there has been much work on how to think about the autonomy of oppressed agents (e.g., Webster, 2021; Stoljar, 2022; Lee, 2022). Vargas (2018) and Singer (forthcoming) both discuss how oppression threatens responsibility. Still, though there is a connection for Vargas between responsibility and freedom, there has been much less discussion about how oppression threatens freedom of the will. Surely oppression constrains agents from pursuing various options,²⁶ either through the direct actions of other agents, or the structures within society, or through internalized oppression. And I think there's a lot to say about how a system of oppression can count as a cause of one's behavior in many ways. A full picture of freedom should thus account for how oppression threatens to diminish freedom.

3.3 | Institutional threats

The state and other institutional agents can constrain our liberty. We already saw how some have been concerned with articulating and defending freedom from government interference (Berlin, 1969). Philip Pettit (1999) has characterized a conception of domination in terms of being *subject to* interference. Separately, libertarians especially have sought to highlight the coercive power of the state. Authors have complexified these notions, considering how domination can occur in other contexts like the workplace (Anderson, 2017), or whether softer government mechanisms like nudges can undermine autonomy (Engelen & Nys, 2020).

It seems obvious that the free will literature should be thinking about how to directly capture these threats. It may be unclear what interference/domination could mean for freedom when there is still more than one path technically available for agents, but there has been work by those thinking about structural domination on what it takes to have not just bare alternatives but *reasonable* alternatives (Bryan, 2023). And there are ways of expressing sourcehood concerns as well. If we are dominated by the state, then all of the conduct we do engage in is *allowed* by the state, and so partially caused by the absence of state intervention.²⁷

Apart from these direct political concerns, several institutions within society appear to threaten freedom. First, we could be concerned directly about the role of the law in influencing our behavior. If legal positivism is true, then legal regimes are institutional—a part of institutional reality (Ehrenberg, 2020). So, it is reasonable to be concerned about whether and how law affects our freedom. Legal prohibitions restrict our options, though the law can also provide the institutional framework for new forms of agential possibilities (and so increases freedom). We could also consider how the law enters our reasoning (e.g., Ehrenberg 2013, 2015, 2016; Adams, 2021), and this could matter for whether the law counts as the source of our conduct.

The education system is another institution raising interesting questions about our freedom. Some worry about whether our children are being indoctrinated in one way or another. While it is controversial exactly what indoctrination *is* (Lewin, 2022), we can recognize it broadly as the conferring of certain ideologies. And insofar as it seems to involve having certain socially accepted beliefs foisted onto us (often before we are capable of rationally reflecting on them), we may reasonably wonder whether it leaves us less free. Yaffe (2003) and Garnett (2015) both take indoctrination to challenge our freedom in different ways, and more needs to be said to consider how indoctrination shapes our options, presuppositions, and dispositions in ways that threatens freedom.

A final set of institutions relevant for freedom are the carceral or surveillance systems within society. Whereas analytic philosophers have focused on punishment, one would have to look farther afield to figures like Foucault and Deleuze to consider the extent to which current society is predicated on systems of discipline and control.²⁸ These authors call us to recognize how authority functions, how we internalize norms of discipline, how certain freedoms encouraged by the state come with methods of control baked into them. These concerns seem related to indoctrination and domination, but it's not obvious that they reduce. These authors pick up on how there is something threatening that is pervasive, and more embedded in our culture and institutions than merely having our freedom threatened by the State.

Considering institutional reality more generally, though, we could consider how having an institutionally defined role could affect our freedom. A familiar Sartrean idea is that our freedom transcends the roles we inhabit. (It is bad faith to say that I had to kill because I am a soldier.) On the other hand, there is good work on how our practical identities could in part determine the scope of our options (Smith, 2010). And it would at least be understandable for certain agents to take the playing of certain institutional roles to be a part of one's practical identity. (At least, it merits a discussion of whether this *must* be bad faith.)

As we move to consider more closely how we as individuals fit into institutional or social reality, it suggests familiar, recent concerns addressed within the free will literature. Some have raised challenges given the findings of social psychology (Nahmias, 2007). And there is a booming discussion around situationism, whether our freedom or responsibility is impacted by the apparent reality of how easily manipulated we are by features of our environment. What is interesting for our discussion here is whether these are appropriately conceived of as threats from above. On the one hand, social psychology is a field studying a subject matter above the psychology of individual

agents. On the other hand, the situations often discussed involve regular interpersonal interactions, and we do conceive of much of our agency as social, or within the context of a society. Perhaps little turns on this issue, but getting our story straight may be necessary for determining whether there really is a threat here, and the nature of that threat. Whereas this section began with a level in search of a threat, I end it then with a threat in search of a level.

4 | BENEFITS

Now that we have several threatening elements from higher levels, it is worth stepping back to observe the lessons these threats suggest. First, focusing on them suggests helpful distinctions. When thinking about elements like oppression, which not all individuals may face, or the law, which might be more or less restrictive, this highlights a contrast with how we typically understand threats from below.

When considering the truth of determinism at the level of physics, one thing to say is that it applies to all actions of all individuals everywhere and at all times. It is universal, or a *global threat*, as I will say. But there is no reason that threats must be global.²⁹ In contrast, we can consider a *local threat* to be a threat relative to a situation/context. And it bears recognizing this, because some of the threatening mechanisms from the last section are most plausibly local. At least when considering political domination or oppression, for instance, it seems like these are threats faced by particular populations and not others.

The primary benefit of recognizing this distinction is that it allows us to see local threats as genuine threats on a par with the global threats, which traditionally get the attention. However, it also allows us to frame several discussions as debates about whether some threat is local or global. One way to think about being in conversation with continental philosophers like Foucault or Deleuze is in considering whether the conditions of society constitute a kind of global threat. And one way of thinking about the question of whether law is *necessarily* coercive is as determining whether legal regimes constitute global threats.³⁰ Or we may frame the longstanding debate over whether indoctrination is unavoidable in terms of its presenting a global threat.³¹

Notice also that if determinism renders us unfree, it appears to render us *entirely* unfree. We can do nothing except what we are determined to do. Or, we are not the source of our actions. However, many of the threats discussed still seem threatening, but without threatening us to this final degree. They constrain our options or affect our choices, but we do still have options and make choices. Here it seems reasonable to distinguish between *total* and *partial threats*.

Within the literature, this idea already has some traction. Capes (2013) and Nelkin (2016) discuss partial responsibility or degrees of responsibility. Robertson (*forthcoming*) characterizes a kind of *partial* autonomy of higher-level sciences. And Burdman (2022) discusses degrees of psychological control. Still, it seems clear that an appeal to partial freedom is crucial for understanding and contextualizing the various threats from above. Determinism as a thesis about physics can only be exactly as constraining as it is, but governments can be more or less coercive.

There has already been some work arguing that and how freedom comes in degrees (O'Connor, 2009; Côté, 2020; Kaiserman, 2021). Kaiserman accepts a view on which freedom is a matter of acting in ways sensitive to one's reasons, and one's reasons can make a greater or lesser contribution to the performance of some action. But while this project feels justified, it is especially in appreciating the threats from above that we see the real *use* of carving out space for partial freedom.³² If the prevailing economic conditions are part of what is causing you to make some choice, a choice that you view as suboptimal and that would not have been made absent those conditions, then it

seems like you are less free. It is a challenge to determine exactly how to express this thought,³³ but what matters for our purposes is that there is a common framework that promises to capture and consolidate the ways in which free will can be threatened.

With these distinctions in hand, we can see how they might crosscut. Determinism as standardly understood may be a global and total threat. And the threat posed by being dominated by one's employer may be local and partial. A nefarious neuroscientist, however, may pose a local yet total threat. And the threat of capitalism seems partial, yet depressingly global. This multiplicity of threats and their scope shows moreover how agents may come apart in their freedom.

These distinctions also make it easier to reassess the challenge with which we began. It is hard to square these apparent threats to our freedom coming from the social sciences with the traditional threats, and this has suggested that we should multiply (Pettit, 2015) or revise (Vargas, 2013) our concept of freedom. Where these disparate threats can be brought together, though, this might motivate us to instead look harder for a single way of understanding freedom. Given the sophisticated work being done around notions of ability, options, and causation; there is good reason to think that traditional understandings of freedom can be elevated to say subtle things about these threats.

Of course, we might not end up with a traditional understanding of freedom. And this may be a positive result. Perhaps there are ways of conceiving of freedom that reveal focusing on alternatives, options, and causes to be impoverishing. (Freedom in terms of our relationship to history, society, or art perhaps.) The foregoing encourages a discussion along these lines. We may ask: Has our obsession with an ability to do otherwise been perpetuated by a fear that we are something like billiard balls, and differentiating ourselves requires the availability of other causal paths? This may be a reasonable fear, but what shape would freedom take if the primary fear we confronted was instead that we are no different than socially programmed automata, an appendage of the machinery?³⁴

I want to end by gesturing towards one last avenue opened by appreciating threats from above. We are concerned with our freedom *as individuals*. Given that each of us writing about free will are individuals, this is unsurprising. However, one could wonder: Is freedom only a property that exists at the level of individual agents? It seems obvious that electrons or ferns are not free. But what about objects at higher levels of nature—like groups, institutions, communities?

There has been work on whether group agents like corporations can be free (Hess, 2014; List, 2019a, p. 155), and much more on whether they can be responsible. Considering matters in terms of levels again justifies this question. However, I can't but notice that in this conversation freedom is only understood to apply insofar as groups and collectives can satisfy what it is for *an individual* to be free. But might there be other ways to think about freedom that are more significant for or paradigmatic of items at higher levels of nature? Ways that *only* make sense when applied to higher level entities?

As one example, consider G. A. Cohen's notion of being 'collectively unfree' (1983). The proletariat are unfree collectively (in the sense that there are few exits out of the proletariat class relative to its population), and this is true *even as* individual members of the proletariat are formally free to exit the class (in that there are more ways to leave than people trying to). So, it is a property of an unorganized collective, not individuals, and not group agents (*c.f.* Schmidt, 2020). Like so many in this paper, this reference is more evocative than demonstrative. But it calls us to expand our horizons in the free will literature. By trying to accommodate these movements from other domains, it promises to enrich and recenter our notion of freedom.³⁵

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ENDNOTES

- ¹A notable exception is Pettit (2015), which presents three distinct concepts of freedom and considers their relations. Vargas (2013) provides another kind of exception, developing an account of freedom/responsibility sensitive to the social conditions that can impede or facilitate it. I won't discuss these more fully except to say that the considerations below could help in the ambition of articulating a unified concept of freedom of will.
- ²This is not entirely fair, as at least Vargas (*op. cit.*) is arguing for a revisionary understanding of freedom that is meant to be directly in discussion with the free will literature.
- ³I leave it to philosophers of biology and others to determine which processes/properties are the best candidates for emergence. But I take it that mitosis is still a candidate (Zhou & Heald, 2020).
- ⁴For history and context, see McLaughlin (1992) and O'Connor (2021).
- ⁵See List (2019b) for an examination/specification of levels and their relation.
- ⁶List & Menzies (2009) and List (2019a, Ch.5) argues directly for the causal efficacy of higher-level properties, and causal efficacy is critical for ontological distinctness.
- ⁷For List, determinism holds where exactly one future is possible, but there are different facts true of the world at different levels, potentially including different facts concerning what is possible.
- ⁸He (and everybody) should take this to be possible. For space, showing this thoroughly must be left as an exercise to the reader.
- ⁹See, *inter alia*, Schaffer (2010, 2018), Trogon (2017).
- ¹⁰As will be discussed more below, it is not clear what that science would be. Schaffer discusses cosmology, and at times motivates holism via considerations of quantum entanglement. This makes it seem that the whole that takes priority would actually be recognized on the bottom level, as something captured quantum mechanics. But that can't be right, if the whole is going to include emergent phenomena (as Schaffer accepts).
- ¹¹For recent pieces arguing for the priority of something like a higher level (though not through priority monism), see Lee (2021) and Saucedo (forthcoming).
- ¹²List's view seems closest to this, though, a form of compatibilism (List, 2019a, Ch.5).
- ¹³To see it drawn out more explicitly, see Unger (2002).
- ¹⁴See Carruth & Miller (2017) and the associated special issue in *Philosophica*.
- ¹⁵For recent discussion of downward causation, see Paoletti & Orilia (2017).
- ¹⁶Sartorio (2014) has compellingly argued that even freedom understood in terms of the ability to do otherwise is better understood as threatened by our conduct being determined by factors beyond our control, more so than by the truth of determinism.
- ¹⁷This is what we might expect if the lowest level really was the most fundamental. On this picture, higher levels may emerge from lower levels, but not to any specific point. There may in fact be a highest level, but nothing seems too concerning about it. On the other hand, if there is a non-arbitrary highest level, if that level is in fact *fundamental*, then there may be ways that we could get worried about our freedom.
- ¹⁸See Patten (1999) for a treatment of the topic.
- ¹⁹This finds an interesting fictional expression in the *Wheel of Time* fantasy series. There, characters are told that there is a Pattern—portrayed as something like the fabric of the universe—that weaves together the lives of individuals over time. Although the characters make choices and are even told they can to some degree influence the Pattern, the Pattern is presented as forceful in dictating the shape of the lives of characters. Characters often wonder whether they can be free in this world.
- ²⁰Such a higher-level plan may leave me unable to do anything otherwise *of significance to the plan*. Perhaps that is no great cost. (Where God's plan would surely be moral, this may be like asking for the freedom to act wrongly, which may not be a sense of freedom of value to us [Wolf, 1980].) Or perhaps it will infuse one's actions with a kind of dread at the cosmic horror of abiding by plans that eclipse us. Alternatively, we may take heart. If God does have a plan for the Universe at only the highest level, then it sounds like a *partial* plan, something to be filled in with our conduct, making us collaborators in the project of the cosmos.
- ²¹It is controversial which works should be emphasized in formulating the view, but often discussed are *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto*, the *Grundrisse*.

- ²² It is a matter of debate what the mechanisms are that motivate changes to the structure of society. Cohen (1978) emphasizes how we are motivated to innovate technologically, and shows how technological changes precipitate structural changes. Whereas Satz (1989) draws out how Marx sees these changes stemming from class tensions.
- ²³ See Brixel (forthcoming) for a recent, high-profile discussion of Marx's conception of alienation.
- ²⁴ The famous quote, attributed both to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek is that "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."
- ²⁵ Farrelly (2005) even characterizes historical materialism in terms of how the superstructure supervenes on the economic structure, where supervenience is understood in terms of higher-level properties.
- ²⁶ As we will discuss at the end of the paper, Cohen (1983) begins a discussion for how oppression undermines freedom that's never quite been carried through in the literature.
- ²⁷ The sourcehood concerns raised by the state are clear. Much of the free will literature presupposes that manipulation undermines freedom, and there is broad recognition of manipulation occurring through politics (Noggle, 2021).
- ²⁸ See Foucault (1977) and Deleuze (1992).
- ²⁹ The significance of the universality of determinism has recently been drawn out in Latham & Tierney (2022, forthcoming). They argue that determinism understood as involving 'universal manipulation' does not challenge our responsibility practices, although what they call 'existential manipulations' would. Their aim involves considering the threat posed by determinism in particular, but they make space for more threatening, non-universal issues.
- ³⁰ See Hughes (2013), Himma (2020), Woodbury-Smith (2020), Miotto (2021).
- ³¹ Within the philosophy of education, one concern is that indoctrination is unavoidable even in a liberal/progressive/democratic education. See, *inter alia*, Macmillan (1983), Garrison (1986), Hanks (2008), Ariso (2019).
- ³² As one recent realization of this, Côté (2022) applies his earlier work on measuring freedom to the context of political freedom, and he gestures towards a number of other authors within that tradition focused on measuring freedom.
- ³³ I lack the space to do justice to this thought here. One issue is how external factors causally contribute to an act alongside the agent's reasons versus how those factors causally contribute to which reasons the agent has, or the strength of those reasons. For Kaiserman (*ibid.*, p. 704), if factors are incorporated into one's reasons, they do not undermine freedom. But he admits that this depends on whether the source of our reasons matters. Tierney (2019) argues that our reasons can be better/worse along a few dimensions, and this can affect our degree of responsibility. And I would accept that we can be more/less alienated from or identified with our reasons, which could have a similar effect. Delving into this is critical for assessing whether, for instance, nudges undermine our freedom, as there is a debate about whether nudges bypass our reasoning (Levy, 2019). The same holds for indoctrination (Ranalli, 2022).
- ³⁴ Discussing List's compatibilism, Menges (2021) briefly considers levels above the agential and whether they point towards a different conception of freedom.
- ³⁵ I would like to thank Carolina Sartorio and Michael McKenna for the invitation to contribute to this issue, as well as for helpful comments. Thanks also to the participants at the Sophia 2021 'Realities of Free Will' workshop, especially Sergei Levin, Maria Sekatskaya, and Alexander Gebharter. This paper also profited from discussions with and recommendations from Brian Berkey, Frank Wu, and Michael Schmitz. Funded by the European Union (ERC-2022-STG, CMP, 101077471). View and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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