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**Limits of Freedom and the Freedom of Limits**

*Jason Lambacher, University of Washington*

**Abstract**: Freedom as the struggle against or the domination of nature sets green politics up to be a politics of control and restriction. But it doesn't have to be this way. While there are limits to freedom, there are freedoms to be gained by respecting ecological limits and the creation -- individual and social -- of environmental values. Additionally, aspirations to freedom are more productive than strategies that deploy guilt, fear, and punishment. Environmental political theorists should appeal to, not avoid, discourses of freedom.

**Key words**: freedom, necessity, ecological context, social context, sustainability, negative liberty, positive liberty, authoritarianism, creativity, individualism, community, aspiration

**Introduction**

Many treat the aspiration toward freedom as an essential element of the human condition. Without freedom, life hardly seems worth living. But "freedom" is a loaded term -- conceptually, ideologically, and politically. Clarifying its varying definitions within discourses and linking it to similar ideas like agency, responsibility, and flourishing is a difficult task in political theory. Environmental political theory is faced with an additional challenge that freedom is typically imagined irrespective of the ecological and social contexts in which we live our lives, despite the fact that freedom is inextricably related to the context in which it is conceived. Many equate "freedom" with "free-living," which is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Ecology* as, "Living independently (i.e. not parasitic on, or symbiotic with, any other organism.)"[[1]](#endnote-1) No such tidy definition exists in political theory, but many think that freedom is fundamentally about living independently. If so, the environmental mantra that "everything is connected" seems to be deeply at odds with conventional conceptions of freedom. If freedom is indeed at odds with ecological health and balance, it stands to reason that freedom as "free living" would be another victim of environmental calamity. But we can think of freedom differently and environmental political theory can and should explore concepts of freedom as one of the most powerful ways to conceive of human endeavors in an ecological context.

The critical status of freedom has come front and center at the same time as environmental challenges because, at its most virulent, the "doom and gloom" rhetoric that has long been a feature of green political discourse would further seem to separate freedom from sustainable living. If the requirements of staving off ecological collapse are imminent, then freedoms drown under a politics of authoritarianism, whether by despots, technocrats, or environmentalists. On the other hand, if ecological catastrophes are inevitable, many may conclude that ignoring these complex problems is the best strategy and change nothing about their lifestyles, in part to maintain vestiges of their "free" life. At first glance, therefore, the eruptive emergence of ecological challenges and subsequent awareness of living in an "age of limits" would seem to treat claims of freedom with suspicion. Western political theory, in particular, has long maintained a distinction between "freedom" and "necessity," where freedom is mainly about liberation from determinism and rising above necessity. Living in an age of limits can be construed as the imposition of a new array of virtues that derive from necessity, and in so doing, a politics emerges that consistently undermines freedom.

Indeed, green politics appears to restrict a number of behaviors that many feel should be a function of their freedom to choose, especially, though not exclusively, in liberal polities. On an individual level these restrictions include, among other things, freedoms of consumption, property, mobility, technology usage, and recreation, all of which are accompanied by feelings of just desert. On a collective level, tension between environmental necessities and similar freedoms emerge, though with a different tone and scope. Freedom to consume can become both a matter of poverty alleviation and economic advancement, property development a debate about economic growth, mobility a key aspect of public policy, technology a matter of equity and development, and recreation about rights to certain kinds of leisure and pleasure. Even those who fashion themselves as "green" (individuals and communities alike) find, upon closer inspection, that while they may willingly act mindfully with regard to one set of preferences, they are altogether unwilling to do so with other habits and behaviors. Freedom is not a unitary and harmonious concept; freedoms are experienced piecemeal and are often in conflict with other freedoms.

Clearly the term "freedom" is complex and often at odds with itself, but this reality does not mean that environmental political theory should not accept the premise that freedom and environmental values have *inherent* oppositional tension, that green politics only entails the surrender of freedoms. At the intersection of freedom and environmental values, a number of tough questions arise: Can conventional ways of thinking about freedom be changed to become more ecological? Is this shift in thinking more than just avoiding the thresholds of ecological limits or "sustaining" what we already have? What does a critical interrogation of "choice" reveal about ways of conceiving individual and collective action? And what do "free choices" say about the blurry divide in green politics between private and public? Moreover, how might we harness aspirations for freedom in order to achieve environmental goals or to see that green ways of life can be expressions of freedom? While restricting freedoms can be associated with authoritarianism, rule by experts, and ethical imperatives of responsibility, living in an age of ecological limits need not be characterized exclusively as a politics of control and limitation. Responses to ecological challenges can ignite political vision and imagination, and in doing so can modify how freedom is discussed and practiced. Freedom raises questions of meaning and purpose, the response to which can inform identities, practices, and policies that reflect desires for *both* freedom and ecological integrity. It can be a productive concept worth exploring for the way in which it -- more successfully than guilt, fear, or punishment -- motivates people to help shape environmental values and imagine different ways of conceiving human relationships with non-human nature. Heeding ecological limits gives us strategies of avoidance, but freedom inspires strategies of aspiration.

This chapter engages a green politics of freedom in three parts. The first draws a selective historical portrait of how freedom gives rise to conceptual tension in environmental political theory. The second examines practical tensions between freedom and green politics. The final part explores a few lines of flight that suggest how freedom and environmental values can be seen as more complimentary than usually supposed.

**Limits of Freedom: Conceptual Tensions**

Discussion about the status of freedom in environmental political theory begins with assumptions about the balance of power between humans and nature. As Hans Jonas points out, the chorus in *Antigone* could once sarcastically mock the pretentiousness of human power as "clever beyond all dreams."[[2]](#endnote-2) Classical warnings against hubris still resonate, but we now know that human power can no longer be dismissed so easily, for the "anthropocene" that is created by modern achievements *are* clever beyond Greek dreams. The split between society and nature is deep in Western political theory (more so than in, say, East and South Asian, animist, and indigenous ethical-political traditions), and freedom as a concept is particularly illustrative of this divide. From Aristotle, whose vision of freedom is that it is won through political life that allows humans to overcome their animal nature, through Vaughan, who exemplifies the Medieval view that freedom is achieved by the spirit struggling to separate itself from matter, freedom is conceived as a flight *from* nature.[[3]](#endnote-3) In political and spiritual realms, the struggle against nature can be seen to enable certain concepts of freedom and give them unique power.

Eventually, the project of controlling nature in Western natural science and political theory became a distinguishing feature of modernism. In Bacon's *Novum Organum*, the goal of exploiting nature is explicitly linked to the augmentation of human power and freedom.[[4]](#endnote-4) Hobbes rejects wholesale the *vita contemplativa*, for freedom is experienced not by a "mind reposed" but by absence of impediments to the restless activity that drives the pursuit of "power after power that ceaseth only in death."[[5]](#endnote-5) The "labor theory of value" theorists, which link classical liberalism with Marxism, also saw the expansion of freedom through the exploitation of nature, whether through property rights of liberal regimes or in communist modes of production. Freedom in the liberal version became a collection of abstract rights that carve out space for the private pursuit of interests. A network of laws and rights are needed to protect the liberty of individuals from coercion by the state or from the strong, for as Isaiah Berlin quips, "freedom for the pike is death to the minnows."[[6]](#endnote-6) On the other hand, freedom in Marxism is more social, and sought in forms of human emancipation achieved through un-alienated labor.

However, the "ecological turn," especially in the 20th century, gave rise to a change in perception that invited a re-thinking of what human freedom means. Freud explained how the outward denial of limits could negate subjective experiences of freedom.[[7]](#endnote-7) The "dark side" of modernism was exposed with ferocity by critical theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno, who looked at the ecological and social impacts of scientism and increasing reliance on instrumental rationality.[[8]](#endnote-8) But it was the emergence of the Limits to Growth discourse in the 1970's that really set the stage for the proposition that freedom was anti-ecological and that political responses to the ecological problems would require authoritarian measures.[[9]](#endnote-9) Limits to Growth theorists shifted the question from what humans will do to nature to what nature will do to us as a consequence of our actions, what William Leiss calls the "revenge of nature" (the blowback experienced by the flux of natural systems).[[10]](#endnote-10) The blithe exercise and ignorant encouragement of freedoms without context could be seen to have Malthusian ecological consequences cumulating from individual choices we make about how we live, work, and play.

Testing ecological limits could lead to any number of ecological transitions that could alter, and perhaps thwart, the human freedom to act through overshooting the earth's carrying capacity for food, fuel, and resources (though this would certainly be felt differently along class, race, and geographic lines, at least initially). The popular environmental equation I=PAT (Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) implied that reducing ecological impact means challenging the freedom to have children or to consume, while highlighting technology's role in exacerbating impact. Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons," William Ophuls' *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, and William Catton's *Overshoot* captured a dystopian mood that portrayed a dark future of constrained choices and radically un-free ways of life.[[11]](#endnote-11) Hardin's solution to the problem of the unchecked pursuit of rational individual economic interests was "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon." Ophuls reasoned that freedoms experienced in liberalism are historically aberrant and the result of the expropriation of "free" ecological resources that will eventually run out. Catton warned of the social and political dangers of overshooting the earth's carrying capacity through the over-exploitation of resources. As Andrew Dobson characterizes it, "Dystopia, then, for political ecology, is written into the dynamics of present social, political, and economic practices."[[12]](#endnote-12) As with Dosteovsky's Grand Inquisitor or Hobbes' Leviathan, who are there to save us from the "curse" or anarchy of freedom, environmentalism represented to this era a politics charged with taming and curbing freedoms in the name of ecology and prudence. Subsequently, this created a backlash in places like the United States, where "freedom" is a confusing but potent political ideology (supporting memes for everything from "freedom foundations" to "freedom fries"). The discursive struggle allowed anti-environmentalists to frame environmental regulations *en toto* as anti-freedom. However, there is not only one way of seeing the relationship between freedom and the environment. Others have found the fullest expression of human freedom through our relationship with nature. Romantics (including Transcendentalists like Thoreau), Buddhists, and a myriad of mystical and wilderness traditions have long sought to experience the freedom thought to be found in nature's example of authenticity, spontaneity, autopoeisis, and symbiosis. The Japanese philosopher Dogen sees freedom as the universe experiencing itself through the self, not as the illusion of the self imposing itself on external objects.[[13]](#endnote-13) Rousseau's thesis that man is born free but everywhere is in chains influences a modern current that links freedom with nature.[[14]](#endnote-14) And although Aldo Leopold argues that, "An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence," the "land ethic" he endorses "changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."[[15]](#endnote-15) Leopold's vision is of a different kind of self enmeshed in an ecological context, and it is not hard to see how enlarging "the boundaries of community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals" enhances, doesn't reduce, a certain kind of human freedom, one found in connection to, not separation from, nature.[[16]](#endnote-16) Murray Bookchin's social ecology perspective sees, as Robyn Eckersley puts it, "nature as the *ground* of freedom" that helps us to overcome hierarchical relations of domination.[[17]](#endnote-17) Ecologism in these perspectives is an expression of social justice, for what we do to nature we do to ourselves.

In fact, another strain of political thinking found in environmental social movements the potential to curtail the runaway productivism of capitalism and socialism.[[18]](#endnote-18) As Piers Stephens argues, some dystopian literature saw nature as representing the emancipation of human freedom from economic and social systems that deigned to control life.[[19]](#endnote-19) The 1980's liberation ecology movements, particularly in Latin America, explicitly linked social with ecological emancipation.[[20]](#endnote-20) Douglass Torgerson explores the potential of green politics by showing how the political theater of protest and activism can engender surprising and transformative experiences that lead to mutual understanding, sensitivity to others, and shared solidarity.[[21]](#endnote-21) Ecovillage movements represent an attempt by intentional communities to model forms of meaningful freedom through the practices of small-scale communal life.[[22]](#endnote-22) The theme of "sacrifice" is also associated with freedom. Cheryl Hall makes the case that, far from denying free choices, sacrifices we make on behalf of environmental goods can represent higher values. She writes, "The more productive approach, then, is to focus on identifying and creating the conditions that will empower people to sacrifice for the sake of sustainability... (This) would empower them to sacrifice consumption freely, that is, to consciously acknowledge the need to choose and then to make the choice that prioritizes what they value most."[[23]](#endnote-23)

It is worth pausing to note that I have so far sketched out two fundamentally different ways to conceive of the relationship between freedom and ecology, one where ecological forces pose a threat to freedom and one where living ecologically is an expression of freedom. But the landscape of environmental political theory is quite vast and it is fair to say that perspectives on freedom are distinctly colored by discrete "isms" in environmental political theory, such as green forms of liberalism, Marxism, feminism, civic republicanism, postcolonialism, Prometheanism, primitivism, and anarchism. There isn't space here to explore these perspectives in depth. But in brief, green liberalism focuses on the compatibility of rights with doing harm to non-human nature and, as Richard Dagger writes, the compatibility of autonomy with the land ethic.[[24]](#endnote-24) Green Marxists confront the centrality of property rights in capitalism and the empty formalism of abstract rights in the context of materially unequal societies, finding freedom in forms of un-alienated labor aligned with ecological settings. Eco-feminists criticize how freedom is constructed to advance masculine conceptions of self in which such subjects exercise freedom of choice in contexts that ignore social or ecological relationships, while creating a different kind of culture and eco-politics.[[25]](#endnote-25) Green civic republicans find freedom in a political realm that, as John Barry puts it, balances rights and duties, regulates the market in the service of sustainability, and connects past, present, and future generations in a vision of justice.[[26]](#endnote-26) Ecological postcolonialism emphasizes the freedom to be found in liberation from colonial regimes and, more recently, economic globalization, by theorizing conditions for political and ecological self-determination.[[27]](#endnote-27) Promethean greens wish to harness the freedom of technological innovation and creative ingenuity, which increasingly is modeled on biomimicry and principles found in nature.[[28]](#endnote-28) Primitivists, in contrast, think that freedom can emerge through de-industrializing modern societies and, in more radical forms, liberation from the conventions of civilization.[[29]](#endnote-29) A variety of green anarchisms, though disparate, unite in the belief that freedom is the highest political value and that a closer connection to nature organically emerges in the absence of authority, that is without institutions of the state, property, or religion.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Other important insights into conceptual tensions between freedom and ecology comes through what Isaiah Berlin calls negative and positive conceptions of liberty, or "freedom from" and "freedom to." Negative and positive liberty can cut several ways in environmental political theory. Insisting on a negative conception of liberty typically means resistance to any generalized vision of the good life. At the same time, however, negative liberty can be interpreted to mean freedom from the brutality of the free market, the pressures of economic growth, and materialism more generally, so that private environmental virtues can be cultivated. The social atomization in both cases may be suspicious of a robust account of the political, but it should be noted that negative liberty can have both destructive and constructive relationships to ecology. Similarly, positive liberty can be read as a coercive attempt by the state or the broader culture to inculcate environmentally correct ways of life. Berlin famously critiques advocacy for "positive liberty" because, to liberals who are in principle committed to subjective accounts of the good life, positive liberty is a project of dubiously educating of individuals or collectives for the purpose of realizing a higher, more authentic self that purportedly lies within.[[31]](#endnote-31) Yet positive liberty can also be interpreted as the freedom that can only be experienced if the benefits of a healthy environment are evident -- clean air, water, rich soil, abundant biodiversity. Michael Maniates writes about the tendency by many in developed countries to "individualize" environmental problems and laments the impoverishment of political imagination and a sense of what could be done if power was confronted directly and distributed differently, if positive liberty could be a matter of collective political will.[[32]](#endnote-32)

These different perspectives on freedom and ecology, therefore, cannot reduce to a single substrate. The relationship between independence and interdependence is layered and complex. And so the question of "freedom" in environmental politics has a different texture depending on individual or collective frames, lines between public and private, and distinctions between negative and positive liberty.

**Limits of Freedom: Practical Tensions**

The conceptual tensions between freedom and environmental politics associated with practical tensions that characterize their relationship. Discussing freedom in a practical sense often means confronting "lifestyle politics" popularly understood. Five examples are germane to illustrating these tensions -- consumption, property rights, mobility, technology usage, and recreation. All also show linkages between questions of freedom and environmental justice in the sense that the freedoms for some often come at the expense of freedoms for others.

The freedom to consume is taken to be one of most important freedoms, and especially in liberal societies, is something that many hold dear (though the aspiration to consume is evident in developing countries and the importance of consumption is of growing concern even in authoritarian states like China). The "sovereignty" of the consumer is often appealed to, even if this sovereignty is strongly manipulated by commercial and political pressures that compel a politics of economic growth (usually less so than by calls for "green" consumption). Despite manipulation, consumers are sensitive to overt attempts to restrict the freedom of what they buy, how much, and for what purpose. Even if one is otherwise conscious of the impact of consumption on environmental degradation, it is challenging to connect the dots between individual consumption and the cumulative impact of consumption in general. Furthermore, even if one can connect the dots, there are conflicts between a sense of one's freedom as a consumer and a sense of one's freedom as a citizen. Just as individuals can see themselves as both consumers and citizens, polities can see themselves as promoting policies of consumption or advocating environmentally civic goods. One can be sympathetic to environmental regulations as a citizen by recognizing their collective import, but still be reticent to give up a freedom to consume as a private individual. Similarly, collectives can democratically agree that some environmental regulations are desirable, but often they are politically insignificant compared to the importance of economic growth on policy and public discourse. An environmental politics of consumption is about what version of freedom -- the consumer or the citizen -- is in control of discrete issues.

Property rights are another area where freedom is in tension with environmental politics. The centrality of property rights to liberal societies (in particular) is well known, and many individuals cling to a vision of themselves as rights-bearing individuals whose property is viewed almost with a sense of sacredness, even in the midst of sprawl, pollution, and species loss, among other problems. The same is analogously true with corporations seeking to make profits and political entities concerned with jobs and development. The freedom to develop private property, the freedom to compete in a marketplace, the freedom to zone land for economic activity magnetize political currents. Corresponding ideologies that envelope property rights are difficult to penetrate and create additional obstacles. To some, policies that shape or suppress claims of property rights would seem tantamount to a reduction of the freedom to accumulate or develop property as one likes. Concurrently, there is increasing recognition that environmentalism can't just restrict itself to the regulation of public lands or entities. Through a variety of means -- conservation easements, land swaps, and habitat corridors -- environmentalists work collaboratively with private property owners (individuals and corporations) in the service of ecological goals.

A third example of practical tension regarding freedom and environmentalism comes through a politics of mobility. How we transport ourselves to home, work, or play is also seen as a matter of personal freedom. Though the construction of roads, railways, and bike lanes are primarily a matter of public domain, transportation is for many a matter of personal choice. Dictating this choice, through taxes, fees or other incentives and disincentives to mobility, can be seen as interfering with this freedom to choose how to move from place to place. In truth, the environmental politics of mobility is highly influenced by the normalizing effects of previous infrastructure histories. One can only get around parts of ex-urban California effectively by car, while in the Tokyo area, a car is much less efficient that taking trains or subways. And like the politics of consumption and property rights, a politics of mobility raises issues of class and group divisiveness. An environmental politics of mobility influences where people live, what transportation systems are available, and where jobs are located. The extent to which these issues are matters of personal freedom and choice, thus, are tenuous, yet people still see how they get around as something they control on a day-to-day basis, even when a full range of transportation options is not available.

A fourth example that shows the practical tension between freedom and environmental politics is technology usage. Of course there are many technologies that enable us to cause ecological damage more or less efficiently, directly or indirectly. And surely many Promethean environmentalists hold out hope for better technologies to deal with the problems that our lifestyles and more ecologically-problematic technologies have created. But an emergent issue comes through the increased role that cybernetics play in our lives. Cybernetic technologies have profoundly changed how we work, create, and relate to each other. Many still think that life online and with all our new devices does not have a big ecological footprint, certainly compared to conspicuous consumption, driving needlessly, or travelling excessively. But the energy usage needed to power data centers and the internet has recently surpassed that needed to power our cars and is expected to surpass emissions from airlines by 2020.[[33]](#endnote-33) The notion that there is a green critique of our relationship with technologies, which is increasingly involved with how we relate to each other, a relationship that for many is intensely personal (and not political), raises novel questions about freedom in green politics.

The last issue of practical tension worth considering is that of how we choose to recreate. For many, how we spend leisure time is fundamentally a matter of personal choice, and hence an issue of freedom. This is particularly true in regards to travel and tourism, perhaps the fastest growing sector of the global economy.[[34]](#endnote-34) Whether we travel by car to parks, rivers, mountains, or by plane to well-worn or exotic locales (even for purposes of ecotourism), the freedom to recreate is to many tied to authenticity and pursuit of the good life. An environmental politics that makes this more difficult, or constrains ways in which people prefer to recreate, whether close to or far from home, would seem to many a limitation on one's freedom to be and enjoy being.

**The Freedom of Limits**

It might seem that mapping the conceptual and practical tensions regarding freedom in green politics yields little more than plotting points of critique. However, freedom can be positioned as a productive concept in environmental political theory beyond critique (as important as that is). It sounds paradoxical, but limiting certain freedoms can give rise to certain other freedoms. The freedoms that are restricted when ecological limits are respected can open new avenues for freedoms that have been degraded or that we don't even fully know we lack. Indeed, thinking about freedom in an ecological context can be a source of creative, aesthetic, and spiritual reflection about the world and the human place in it. Thinking about freedom is guided by the challenge to live in *places* where other lifeforms and systems are also permitted to unfold in their own ways. There is no fixed answer to what this means nor is there an original harmony prescribed by either human nature or natural principles. As John Barry writes, there is no “reading off” hypothesis that predetermines a particular social or political arrangement from examples found in nature.[[35]](#endnote-35) Nor does scientific data about dangerous environmental trends translate into policy *ipso facto*. And there is not one model of an ecologically sustainable society that scripts what freedom should look like. Attitudes toward freedom are different in arguments for, say a green state and green anarchism, though both can nevertheless be valid approaches to the enactment of green ways of life. The intimate embrace of a person/planet approach is unlike a global institutional perspective on environmental issues, but both can appeal to a sense of freedom to motivate action. We are free to imagine different ways of living respectfully, consciously, and responsibly in nature.

Reflection on ecological limits provide an important context that ignites social creativity in values, lifestyles, design, technologies, and systems of production and consumption, and thereby encourages a re-evaluation of what freedom means. Freedom in this sense is about the creation of values and strategies of political aspiration that result from the presence of environmental risks and the desire for ecological ways of life. One opportunity to formulating freedom as a fruitful concept, then, is to explore how it can be a motivational concept rather than a destructive ideology. Freedom should be about inspiring *possibilities* and inviting creative reflection on the political conditions in which it can be experienced for humans and non-humans alike. One of the key creative projects, in fact, can be a re-imagining of freedom to include sentient beings and ecosystems in worldviews that generate flourishing and diversity.

Ecological challenges certainly invite an immanent critique of the concept of freedom and its dominant forms of ideology in society. Ecologically destructive ideologies of freedom have three main characteristics – they promote individual rights irrespective of ecological contexts, demand that productivism and consumerism expand indefinitely, and disallow any moral obligation to care for non-human nature. On a basic level, the exercise of freedom is not possible without functioning ecological systems. Therefore, appealing to "freedom" as an abstract right in a de-contextualized way (either by ignoring environmental or social impacts) cannot justify one's choices *a priori*, for the context in which one makes (or is able to make choices) is key. As Nancy Hirschmann writes, “Freedom is precisely a combination of self-creation and what happens to you, the internal as well as the external, the combination of and the dynamic between the two. If freedom is concerned with the capacity to choose, then social construction requires us to think about the broader conditions in which choices are made.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Ecological limits can be construed as a context in which our “choices” are not only both constrained but also "constructed." The *freedom to* construct responsible forms of positive liberty can be liberating, both for individuals and collectives. Environmental political theory insists that the context in which choices are made and outcomes they lead to are part of a critical discourse about the responsible exercise of freedom. Freedom is especially constrained with regard to negative conceptions of liberty that disregard ecological consequences. Liberalism need not be the "evil genius" behind the ecological crisis, as Marcel Wissenburg suggests some greens think it is, for there is a case to be made that if liberals cherish choices, it stands to reason that healthy environments are important to the exercise of choice. [[37]](#endnote-37) Nevertheless, if freedom is to have valence in environmental political theory, the atomizing effects and abstract tendencies of negative liberty need to be cracked.

Appeals to negative freedom, dominant as they are in contemporary societies, do not exhaust the promise of freedom as a motivational source for green politics. For ecological responsibility to also be a goal of freedom it needs to generate affective appeal. Seeing how this can be accomplished requires cognitive and material shifts in our aspirations toward freedom. It is not easy to get out of the "iron cage" that Max Weber slyly suggests characterizes the modern world, but freedom in environmental politics needs a degree (perhaps many degrees) of liberation from materialism.[[38]](#endnote-38) There is considerable evidence that a less busy and materialistic lifestyle in the context of social equity increases happiness. We should be able to see that we are free when we work toward creating conditions that yield sustainable societies. Freedom is fundamentally about quality of life that people feel they help to create, for themselves and others.

Many political theorists would resist an attempt to see freedom as anything other than the individual pursuit of the good life, but a more promising stream for theorizing freedom in environmental political theory is to understand it as relational. This way of viewing freedom is less about independence and more about intentional and integral interconnections with others -- people, species, ecosystems, places. A relational construction of freedom cannot countenance the exercise of freedom that comes at the expense of other people or by the exploitation of the environment. In this sense, freedom should be closely linked to environmental justice perspectives about the social and ecological impacts of harm and to ideas of environmental responsibility and flourishing. Phillip Pettit's work from a civic republican perspective on freedom as non-domination is also relevant to casting freedom in relational contexts, particularly for theorizing conditions under which an ethos of non-domination extends to other species and ecosystems.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Humans are doers and the effects of action should relate critically to the freedom to undertake such actions. As Erich Fromm re-works Descartes, he proposes that "I am because I effect."[[40]](#endnote-40) This definition can be interpreted in an individual and existential way that encourages personal responsibility for one's actions. At the same time, it can be interpreted in a language of public syntax, about what "we" effect together. Both approaches can benefit greatly from an Arendtian approach to political action that sees freedom not as a matter of being but of becoming. Freedom is less about the absolute declaration that we are "born free": it is the surprising achievements that are experienced when acting with others for the purposes of something noble and excellent. Drawing on Machiavelli's concept of *virtu*, Arendt suggests that freedom is a form of virtuosity, what happens in the performance of our lives that expresses meaningful values.[[41]](#endnote-41) This can't be scripted in advance. An exhilarating sense of discovery of what is possible should be kept alive for those who help to shape green politics

Cynics might see this as naive utopianism, but linking ecological limits with freedom in this way should not be confused with utopianism – a depiction of life in “no place.” Because we can, to a degree, freely create our world according to how we wish it to be doesn’t mean that we can create any world that we want or that political reality will ever fully match normative vision. Freedom is not the same thing as agency. Nor should it green politics promise, using Hans Jonas's phrase, "prophecies of bliss."[[42]](#endnote-42) As Andrew Dobson writes, neither ecological conditions nor the human condition is infinitely malleable.[[43]](#endnote-43) Freedom as “infinite malleability” paints fantastical varieties of green utopianisms, which explains why Dobson thinks rightly thinks that environmentalism can inspire many different causes yet leave a “confusing political burden.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

At the same time, freedom in environmental political theory is very much about political imagination. Marius De Geus’ argument for the relevance of utopian works, be they utopias of sufficiency or abundance, are important for raising critical awareness of issues in the present, many of which are “quiet” problems whose cumulative effects unfold over long periods of time.[[45]](#endnote-45) Green utopian works also stoke political imagination by getting people to envision how freedom and sustainable living can coalesce. Yet we should be mindful that the terms “utopian” and “dystopian” carry much dramatic cargo and there may be nothing especially utopian *or* dystopian about a sustainable society that values ecological limits and does so in a way that nurtures appeals to freedom. Freedom may be a high aspiration, but freedoms may in fact be quite ordinary. The critical point is less about the abstract question of whether humans are "free" to respond to ecological challenges that we are mostly responsible for making, and more about the contextual ways in which the "choice architecture," as Thayler and Sunstein put it, can be "nudged" in a more ecological direction, both for individuals and polities.[[46]](#endnote-46) Joseph Meeker's argument that "saving the environment" need not be played out in a tragic vein -- the world can heal through a "play ethic," tactics of reconciliation -- like novelty, spontaneity, wit, and imagination -- that are not strictly functional or goal oriented.[[47]](#endnote-47) A play ethic is also about methods of cooperation with others so that everyone can *keep on playing*.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Another important step is to show that while living sustainably may restrict some choices, it does not diminish freedom. Richard Dagger’s work (drawing on Pettit) distinguishes “option freedom” from “agency freedom.” Option freedom refers to the number of choices that a person (or, I would add, a community) may have. Pettit writes that a choice between “20 barely discernible beers” means little to someone who would rather drink something else (or a different style of beer).[[49]](#endnote-49) Agency freedom is the capacity to be autonomous, and thus is concerned with the *value* of options available and the context in which they are experienced.[[50]](#endnote-50) Maximizing option freedom may increase the number of choices immediately but endanger both option freedom and agency freedom in the long run by destroying ecological contexts in which one can capably exercise choices. Dagger writes, “What an ecological or land-ethic does … is to encourage us to think of our relationship to nature as a matter of autonomy … Autonomy is self-government, not license … [and] the question, then, is not whether autonomy is compatible with the land ethic but whether the pursuit of autonomy, properly understood, leads to the land ethic.”[[51]](#endnote-51) By restricting option freedom but preserving agency freedom, choice need not be diminished, choice that may give even greater meaning to one’s life through opportunities afforded by education or participatory politics that empower people. Freedom is thus less about the number of choices one has but the contexts that expand agency freedom. In other words, pursuing agency freedom may involve “sacrificing” some options, but sacrifice is not necessarily pejorative. We may sacrifice some options so that, say, other species may live, but doing so can deepen a sense of freedom, for we are living deliberately and with a sense of purpose.

**Conclusion**

Much environmentalism does admirable work in preparing us to reckon with a future where ecological limits will play a larger role in environmental politics. But much environmentalism also deploys a doom and gloom rhetoric to explain logics of catastrophe and in doing so taps meager sources of motivation. A politics of fear is often behind appeals to self-interest or ethical duty. Motivation through self-interest is too narrow in effect, and ethical commands miss an opportunity to generate affective enthusiasm by a critical mass of people. *Avoiding* problems is an insufficient approach to our ecological challenges. A more effective approach is to emphasize the *freedom to* create ecological responsibility and sustainable societies. This a creative and imaginative endeavor, at once joyful, comic, and serious, and need not be cast only in a gloomy and tragic vein. Ecological limits exist and we need to be clear that they constrain action. But discursive strategies about what limits mean and how they impact our sense of freedom should be explained differently. As France More Lappe writes, "We can then experience real freedom: not freedom from rules but freedom with power -- freedom to participate in creating rules that promote life."[[52]](#endnote-52) Freedom in contemporary times has extraordinary political resonance and environmental political theorists should work with rather than against these aspirations.

Environmental politics from the beginning confronted the material excesses and ecological hazards of liberal, social, and corporatist states. The idea that freedom is in tension with environmentalism is based on certain assumptions about freedom that are disconnected from larger human and ecological communities. Liberal societies, to the extent that the ideology of negative liberty is dominant, have particular trouble seeing how freedom and sustainable living can coexist. Many anti-environmentalists have skillfully framed environmentalism as anti-freedom. But as Goethe, remarks, "None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free."[[53]](#endnote-53) Freedom is indeed a critical concept in environmental political theory. Interrogating it means challenging conventional and ideologically comfortable assumptions in contemporary societies and the power of those who benefit from the status quo. However, those who are skeptical of freedom as a productive concept are missing its potential. Yearnings for freedom are powerful motivations in modern life. Freedom is a rich and robust concept that can nourish environmental imagination and political vision. The appeal of freedom also helps to give energy to action and inspires political involvement. As Emma Goldman supposedly remarked, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." This is another way of saying that the transition to sustainable societies should be accompanied by the music of celebration, and the varied freedoms of human expression. Contemporary societies honor technical creativity, but we should struggle to honor the freedom that accompanies the creation of new values.

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