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Freedom, Spontaneity, and Our Encounters

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This article defends the significance of our encounters on the grounds of their distinctive contribution to our freedom. The variety and novelty of our encounters, and the spontaneity they allow us in the shaping of our selves, creates opportunities for us to revise our conceptions of the good, to try out new narratives of our lives, and different ways of presenting ourselves. Even when we don't take up these opportunities, still our encounters provide us with a sense of the openness and possibility of a human life. This role of encounters in a free human life challenges the overemphasis when conceptualising liberal freedom on the unimpeded pursuit of our plans or conceptions of the good: freedom is also about having a life that lies open before us. This defence also makes central not the fleeting contact between strangers on city streets and parks which has hitherto been the focus of political philosophers but, rather, our casual connections and weak ties with others, and in places beyond the city and its public spaces.

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Freedom, Spontaneity, and Our Encounters

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Shaking off the apparent collective amnesia, recall for a moment the experience of lockdowns, with the padlocked playgrounds and taped off park benches; the shutting of schools, pubs, cafes, football grounds, and art galleries; and the signs asking strangers to stand two meters apart. Many worked from home if their job permitted and so no longer encountered others on the commute or in the office. This article begins from one thing that was then lost for many of us, something that might have seemed fleeting and insignificant but turned out to matter: our casual connections, loose acquaintances, and interactions with strangers.[1] I have in mind here encounters such as those between like-minded patrons chatting in a pub; between loose acquaintances at work; between coffee sellers and corner shop owners and their regular customers; and between parents at the playground or school gates. Under lockdown organised or formal associations like choirs and unions often continued their activities, albeit in ways that were constrained by circumstances, say, moving meetings online. By contrast, lockdowns radically restricted and sometimes eliminated these informal and happenstance encounters with others.[2]

This article will defend the value of such encounters with one another. Within architecture and urban theory, and amongst philosophers drawing on that work, the importance of our encounters with strangers in public spaces is defended by appeal to the resulting social benefits. Encounters with strangers in spaces like city streets and parks are credited both with contributing to social cohesion and with encouraging attitudes that are needed in a democracy, from the tolerance of difference to forming

[1] Philosophers, too, have paid far more attention to formal associations like unions and intimate associations like parenthood, as compared to these looser connections. But there are some important exceptions, notably in discussions of public space, democracy, and encountering strangers, to which I return throughout.

[2] This analysis is not intended as any criticism of lockdown policies; rather, it explores the value and demands of our encounters.

our sense of a public.[3] Recently, Kimberlee Brownlee has added an individual benefit of encounters, namely, that they contribute to meeting our social needs.[4]

In this article, I offer a different defence of the significance of these encounters; one based not on democratic sentiments or social needs but, rather, on the contribution that our encounters make to our freedom. I argue that our encounters have a distinctive value for, and in, living a free life. In particular, the variety and spontaneity of our encounters, and the spontaneity they allow in our shaping of our selves, create opportunities for us to revise our conceptions of the good, to try out new narratives of our lives, and different ways of presenting ourselves. Even when we don't take up such opportunities, still, our encounters provide us with a sense of the openness of a human life and its possibilities. This role of encounters in a free life challenges the overemphasis when conceptualising liberal freedom on unimpeded pursuit of our conceptions of the good and ways of life; rather, freedom is also about having a life that lies open before us. This freedom defence also changes our focus by making central not the fleeting contact on city streets and parks between strangers that have hitherto been the focus of political philosophers but, instead, our casual connections with others and loose acquaintances, and in spaces beyond the city and its public spaces.

I then turn to the conditions for realising this dimension of freedom. I defend a rich life of encounters as a shared endeavor that requires our participation in order to sustain this collective good. Drawing on work in architecture, urban theory, and political theory on encounters and public spaces, I propose too that a broad sweep of state decisions also sustain or inhibit this aspect of a free life. States shape and unevenly distribute our opportunities to encounter one another, and not only through the familiar and commonly criticised direct decisions about public spaces such as selling-off parks, but also through a wider range of policies from encouraging disruptive tech start-ups to promoting working from home.

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[3] For illustrative examples of a substantial literature: see the greatly influential Jacobs 1961; on the significance of weak ties in integrating communities, by contrast to our strong ties leading to 'overall fragmentation', see Granovetter 1973 (esp. p. 1378); for a rich defence of the importance of public spaces and the ways they are constituted for democracy, Parkinson 2012; on unplanned encounters and their value for free speech and democracy, Sunstein 2009; on cities and living with difference, Young 1990; defending public parks in particular, Kohn 2020; and extending this connection to 'in-between' spaces, Zacka 2020.

[4] On 'interactions', see Brownlee 2020. On their being a 'petri dish' for acquaintances and so more lasting associations, for instance, see p. 105.

I. SPONTANEITY, ENCOUNTERS, AND A FREE LIFE

Let's begin with the definition of an encounter. Mine is a broad definition, including both fleeting meetings with strangers and our casual connections and acquaintances. I take this to be justified by a crucial dimension of similarity, namely, that both are matters of happenstance, of bumping into, as opposed to being cultivated or deliberate. Another way to put this is that they are in an important sense incidental: being a by-product of your main activity, such as taking your child to play, doing your work, or buying a coffee. Two further defining and shared features of what I'll term 'encounters' follow. The first is their informality, in that we don't formally join, or pay dues, or have regularised, deliberate meetings. The second is a looseness in any commitment, in that any bonds or obligations they may come with are easily broken, such as the felt obligation to continue a casual conversation with a stranger or distant colleague, rather than abruptly walk away. In addition, less is demanded of us to participate in or join in some encounter than is required for a formal or organised association. What exactly is demanded of us is also far from clear. However, an encounter's time frame is not a defining feature: some are long, others short; some are one-offs, others repeated.

This category of 'encounter' thus includes but extends beyond the fleeting meetings with strangers often considered by democratic theorists, such as encountering others on the street or in the park, to include our repeated but not close contacts.[5] Indeed, while the stranger on the street is a possible source of the dimension of freedom that I shortly describe, the paradigm cases involve either more prolonged contact, or some small aspect of shared lives or experience, such as the connection between the coffee vendor and the regular customer, between patrons at the pub, or the parents bumping into each other at the playground.[6] The mere witnessing of the strangers around us, without engaging with them, will be a more marginal case on my account.[7]

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[5] See, for instance, Parkinson 2012 or, with explicit restriction to strangers with whom we lack intimacy, Zacka 2020. Kimberlee Brownlee 2020 picks out 'interactions', which include fleeting moments of contact but not acquaintances. Her analysis emphasises their expressive aspect in viewing interactions as sitting between association and expression. That means taking an important aspect of, say, the encounter between coffee seller and customer to be the expression or bid to communicate. But I take it that what we get from an encounter with others of this kind is a valuable instantiation of different aspect of freedom. On my account too, the distinctive value of our encounters lies in their importance to living a free life and not, as is the main focus of Brownlee's account, their contribution to social inclusion.

[6] Drawing our attention to the significance of having some small part of shared experience, see Ryan 1998. Emphasising the importance of mixed-use spaces, including commerce, see Jacobs 1961.

[7] For an account of the value of that witnessing of strangers, even from balconies, see Zacka 2020.

With the description in view, the defence of encounters begins from the observation that some people pursue looser associations and more fleeting connections over – and sometimes to the detriment of – more formal and lasting associations. Consider those who frequently change where they live, their jobs, and friendships, whose lives are characterised by new acquaintances and fleeting interactions rather than lasting bonds. Liberals, of course, ought not see such a way of life as less worthy of protection from interference, nor any less an expression of freedom, than a more rooted and committed way of life. Importantly, it is far from unusual to find value in fleeting encounters and looser associations. Many felt a loss in lockdown from its radical narrowing of our social lives and the resulting diminishment of variety, novelty, and interest. It turned out that many of us had a set of loose acquaintances and people whose paths happened to cross ours in our ordinary lives, people who were not close enough to call or set up online meetings with and yet whose presence in our lives was something that we realised that we found valuable, and that we missed. Those drawn to living in cities might have felt this loss most acutely: a variety of interactions, with a changing cast of characters to encounter, are amongst the attractions of a city life. [8]

Such variety and novelty are amongst the distinctive goods provided by encounters and loose connections, by contrast to our intimate, lasting, or formal associations. Their variety stems from the fact that people with whom we form formal and deep intimate associations tend to be more like us than those whom we encounter.[9] In addition, we can simply manage far fewer formal associations and close intimate relations than we can fleeting encounters and loose acquaintances: close relationships and participating in associations are burdensome in terms of our time and attention in a way that encounters are not.[10] The novelty of encounters is obvious in the case of

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[8] This is best captured by Young 1990, in her description of the ideal of a city life as involving 'an openness to unassimilated otherness' (p. 251) and providing a distinctive pleasure 'in being open to and interested in people we experience as different' (p. 267). However, the account of the value of encounters offered in this article is not restricted to the ideal city – nor indeed, to city life. For a discussion, see Section II.

[9] On the variety of our weak ties, in their being more likely to link members of different groups, as compared to stronger relations, see Granovetter 1973, esp. p. 1376. On tendencies to group tightly with those who are like us in relevant respects, see: on intimate relations, e.g., Schwartz 2013; on education levels, Mare 1991. For an examination of the more complex underlying causes of being with those similar to ourselves than preferences alone in the case of race in the USA, see Wimmer & Lewis 2010. Here, the relevant kinds of variety go beyond these commonly-studied kinds, to encompass also those with different ways of life or life circumstances in other senses.

[10] Although Elizabeth Brake observes that interactions are not *entirely* without costs in her 2022 article.

encountering strangers: they are new to us. Yet our loose acquaintances and casual connections, too, offer novelty, even though the interaction is repeated: there tends to be a slow unveiling of facts about, and features of, the other over time. We do not know them well and so they too can provide a newness in our interactions, by contrast to the predictability of those we know well.

Assisted by that variety and novelty, our encounters provide a distinctive dimension of freedom, or an element of a free human life: namely, an experience of spontaneity and serendipity, of feeling that our life's course lies open with a space of new possibilities ahead, rather than being altogether chosen in advance, constrained, or determined.[11] There is something significant, then, about the spontaneity of our encounters and the spontaneity that these then introduce into the shape of our lives. We do not know who we will meet in cafes and pubs, at large conferences, or in the playground, for instance, and there is an element of chance or room for serendipity in how these encounters might shape our lives.[12]

What these encounters provide is more than mere exposure to an array of alternatives. Exposure alone can be achieved in other ways, such as by watching television programmes or reading novels. Through our encounters, we also gain opportunities to try out other personas, to explore different narratives of our lives, or to examine other possible directions that our lives might take.[13] Further, we can do

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[11] Jonathan Gingerich 2018, p. 834, spells out something like this sense of freedom in a recent piece on the value of games: 'Sometimes I have a feeling that the future of my life is open, rather than closed, that the possible paths into the future that stretch out before me are uncountable, and that I could do or become anything. I feel free'. See also the description of 'unplanned and unscripted activity' in Gingerich 2022, although there are some significant divergences. His has some parallels to the kinds of spontaneity I explore, especially his observations on its being unplanned and unscripted, although my examples are more mundane and everyday, and my account focuses on forming our selves and our future course, as opposed to emphasising, as Gingerich does, the experience of spontaneity in itself. The above also echoes, in a way, the idea of a right to an open future in Feinberg 2014. But, if so, it is one applied to adults, not about children. Rather than children not having their future interests infringed upon, this is about all of us having other opportunities and possibilities open up in front of us.

[12] Brownlee 2020 observes some potentially lasting effects on lives from interactions (fleeting moments of contact): that they can be turning points as in the one-night stand that leads to pregnancy, or provide the piece of information that changes what we do with our lives (p. 102); alleviate loneliness (p. 101); become a little part of one's self-image as the experience becomes a story we tell (p. 101). The last is the closest to the ideas I explore here, but the relevance of encounters to self-image I defend is on different – and more substantive – grounds.

[13] On our narratives, and their changing nature as we age, see McAdams 2011. The idea of a persona here draws on the kind of performance or 'face' examined by Erving Goffman, for instance in his 1967 book.

so on and with acquaintances and strangers who are not our ordinary audiences. You can discuss whether you'd like another child, the ways you might escape your current career, or what you might like to do with your retirement, with the mums you meet in playground, the person you sit next to in the hospital waiting room, or the person who sells you a coffee most mornings. You can try out a different way of telling how you've ended up with the life you have, trying out a new narrative, a new construction or new integration of your hopes and aims and fears. You can try out being someone who is less straight-laced than you ordinarily are with an acquaintance. Or you can give a trial run to aspects of your identity that you have disguised or not yet (fully) realised, say, some aspect of your sexuality. In addition, we can do so without the kinds of commitment that is required on making such pronouncements to those with whom we are close. We are not so embedded within particular communities or relationships, then, that we never get to *try on* other ways of presenting ourselves, or other ways of life.[14] Encounters thus provide us with opportunities to go new ways, to revise our conceptions or ways of life.

There is also a more diffuse way in which our encounters shape how our lives feel, in terms of how free we feel we are to go new ways. When encountering others, we may not take up the opportunities to try things out; certainly, we may not do so that often. Seeing a glimpse of another kind of life sometimes just reaffirms to us our own, different, choices. All the same, encountering a variety of others and seeing a small part of their lives, still provides a sense of the openness and possibility of human life in general.[15] As Iris Marion Young describes, in sketching her ideal of a city life where we affirm group differences, 'City dwelling situates one's own identity and activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of other activities'.[16] But we need to feel that we are free to go new ways, in order to go new ways: the *feeling*, then, is one precondition for this dimension of our freedom. Again, too, this is found more in our actual encounters than when encountering imagined characters on a screen or on a page. The latter seem distant and unreal while the people that we encounter in our daily lives are

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[14] That friends help us to gain self-knowledge is a familiar thought, with its roots in Aristotle. Fleischaker's 1998 defence of informal, looser association invokes the role of friends in our deliberations. Here, the thought is that we can re-describe who we are, and think through the alternatives we have, with those with whom we lack such intimacy – and that this, too, can create self-knowledge and the possibility of change.

[15] This last part on the value of encounters echoes, to some extent, the celebration of (the ideal) of cities and difference in Young 1990, where she describes the pleasure of 'being drawn out of one's secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising' (p. 239) and the 'openness to unassimilated otherness' (p. 227). My account emphasises the value to the individual, rather than the vision of how to live well together.

[16] Young 1990, pp. 237–8.

real, and close. The sense of openness and possibility of a life that our actual encounters provide, then, feels more vivid, and more realisable.

Above, I have proposed a varied set of ways in which our encounters can contribute to a free life, to our lives lying open ahead. One is through an exposure to new possibilities, which can lead to a change (or an affirmation) of our course. Another is through providing low risk and low-cost possibilities of experimenting with and testing out changes, big or small, to our personas or presentations of our selves, our narratives, or our goals. A last is simply contributing to the feeling that our lives generally lie open ahead: a feeling that is needed for us to go ahead and revise our paths, in the absence of other pushes to do so such as finding the route we had chosen, blocked. These, together, make up the way in which encounters contribute a dimension of a free life.

It might be tempting to think that each of these aspects is provided by a discrete type of encounter. For instance, perhaps only strangers offer us a sense of the many possibilities in a life, since our acquaintances become familiar.[17] By contrast, trying something out might require some connection to another that is lacking between strangers but found amongst loose acquaintances. Then again, imagine if, when meeting a fellow parent who you often see in the playground, you suddenly changed your presentation of yourself, or the narratives you tell about your life. Perhaps, then, it could turn out that the relevant group for this aspect of this freedom, of trying something out, is smaller still, being only the less familiar of our acquaintances and connections.

Yet such a clear separation between kinds of encounters and the functions they serve would be a mistake. In particular, whether we have sufficient connection to others to try something out or on often depend more on the circumstances than on the type of encounter. Encounters with strangers in certain settings are particularly rich with possibility in terms of trying on and out new narratives and ideas and senses of self. In hospital waiting rooms, or when sitting next to each other on planes and in bars, amongst others, we can be connected in ways that permit – or even enable – the deeper conversations.[18]

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[17] The worry that we might lose something through becoming *too* close to others is also shared by Zacka 2020 and Jacobs 1961. But there, the thought is that forced intimacy means we won't interact, or will tolerate diversity less; here, that these connections wouldn't provide the good of a sense of possibility, an openness to a life.

[18] It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full accounting of what turns an encounter into one where we can actually try things out or on, as opposed to only feel a sense of possibility. The examples above are suggestive of some of the conditions that might enable this, such as

So, too, on the flip side, our acquaintances contribute to the sense of the openness of a life. First, generally there is some turnover in who we encounter or, at the least, in with whom we encounter even our familiar and repeat acquaintances. The kinds of spaces in which we tend to meet them are often open to many, or all, and we tend to lack control over which individuals, or which combinations of individuals, might appear. The realm of our encounters is not after all that of our private or home-based intimate lives. Room for serendipity thus remains. Second, acquaintances are not our intimates; there is still a lot that we don't know about them. We often find out new snippets about someone as we encounter them over and over, snippets that may provide novelty. We don't know our acquaintances well enough, then, for them to hold no surprises. Indeed, one of the delights to getting to know someone new is the slow unveiling of a whole character or a whole person.

It is also untrue that we face limited possibilities for trying things out or on with the more familiar of our casual connections and loose acquaintances. That is because very little of the commitment to do what we say, to make the changes we claim to want to make, and to be consistent in the new narratives that we adopt that would apply when we try out changes on those close to us arises where we try out these changes on even repeat acquaintances. It is far less embarrassing to try things out on an acquaintance and then not follow through, than it is with an intimate or someone close to us, who holds us accountable. You can exit an acquaintanceship, too, with little cost, if needs be.

However, it has to be conceded that a fleeting mere encounter with a stranger on the street makes a limited contribution to this dimension of freedom. There is still some small possibility that this encounter becomes something more: a moment of connection, of being able to try on, or out, something new. But this is why very fleeting encounters with strangers are a more marginal case on my account, while paradigm cases are repeated encounters, when we encounter someone with whom we share some facet or aspect of a life, or encounters in circumstances that enable connection. The value of trying things out, or on, hinges on the fact that we are interacting with someone else. We see how our presentation of ourselves or our narratives of our lives go over with the other party. We learn something about ourselves as we see our attempts

alcohol, sharing a confined space, or a visible shared experience. On the hindering side, one might worry that the scripted nature of our encounters with others – say, the dog walkers' polite greeting – blocks attempts to deepen the encounter and so use it to try something out. However, things are not quite so simple: sometimes those very same scripts are what give us an opening, and a reassurance about the others' intentions, which lets us begin a conversation. With thanks to an anonymous referee and to Cécile Laborde for drawing my attention to these issues.

reflected back at us – rejected, resisted, or accepted – and in how we experience that feedback. The other party is not inert but, rather, a participant in our self-construction. We can't fully try things out, to explore, on our own in a room or by merely witnessing some stranger at a distance, rather, we assume a line in our interactions, and see how it flies with the other, and how it feels to us.[19] Often, too, it is the connection, whether through repeat acquaintance or by being brought to together for a moment by circumstance – sharing the hospital waiting room, sitting next to a stranger on a long flight, chatting over the heads of one's children, drinking next to each other in the bar – that opens up the space for conversations about some aspect our lives, a chance to try on or out new narratives or presentations of ourselves. By contrast, the mere fleeting moment with a stranger, or the nod on the street, might let us view alternatives, but won't let us try on something new.

II. ON LIBERAL CONCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM AND THE CITY

With the freedom defence in view, there are two reframings of contemporary discussions in political philosophy that result. First, spontaneity and a sense of the openness of a life of the kind just described aren't usually considered in the context of liberal freedoms.[20] In mainstream liberal political philosophy, despite its many variations, there is a familiar way in which agents and freedom are conceptualised.[21] There is a tendency to picture agents as choosing a way of life, values, or conceptions of the good that they then deliberately pursue. The fundamental liberties are then conceived of as protecting such decisions: say, to choose and practice your religion, to pursue chosen intimate relationships, to form opinions and then express them, to join groups to collectively pursue your (non-criminal) goals – and, especially, that you can do all these things without state interference. That picture hasn't come from nowhere. Rawls, in defending the priority of the basic liberties, holds that we have a fundamental interest in determining our plan of life, our conception of the good.[22] The basic liberties, and the

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[19] See Goffman's 1967 discussion of how we adopt a line in our interactions, and then get uptake from others – or don't.

[20] In addition, Jonathan Gingerich 2022 observed that spontaneity is overlooked in *moral* philosophy on freedom.

[21] Here, I refer to the mainstream, post-Rawls, liberal (or liberal egalitarian) philosophers, such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Joseph Raz, amongst many others. I'll use the term 'liberal' to describe these. While of course there is substantial divergence amongst the various accounts, there are important similarities too, detailed.

[22] See Rawls 1971, e.g. p. 561, on the moral powers and choosing a conception of the good; and p. 563 on the priority of the liberties.

liberal conception of freedom, may thus seem centrally conceptualised as a matter of having freedom to control one's life: to be as one wishes to be in some persisting way, in selecting one's goals or aims and then pursuing these deliberately. In particular, these freedoms protect us from the overreach of state control, such as its dictating which religion to follow.

This vision of brings to mind a familiar challenge posed by communitarians. In response to what they saw as the liberal's conception of the atomised individual, communitarians insisted that we are instead embedded in communities and cultures which shape our selves and the ways of life that we pursue. Our ways of life are not chosen from nothing or nowhere.[23] But I suggest that an opposing aspect of our lives is *also* obscured by the vision of agents sketched above, if it becomes too dominant: namely, the spontaneity of our lives, that they are to some extent unplanned and unpredictable rather than fixed in place, such that our lives lie open ahead. A common feature of the modern state – as compared to, say, the stereotypical picture of life in a traditional village – is that we are exposed to an array of alternative ways of life or conceptions of the good. That happens particularly, and predominantly, through the variety of our encounters. Against the communitarians, liberals insist that people can choose ways of life, rather than being stuck, embedded in place.[24] But we need things to choose amongst, and my suggestion is that social encounters give us a real sense of, and access to, these alternatives.[25]

Introducing a dimension of freedom as spontaneity isn't necessarily at odds with such a liberal paradigm. That liberal refrain, following Rawls, of course invokes not only the ability to form and pursue one's conception of the good, but also to *revise* it.[26] There could be space, then, for a concern with spontaneity in the liberal picture, even though there hasn't been much attention to it yet. In these encounters, this space to try things out and on, we can go new ways, revising our previous narratives, plans, and sense of who we are.

Some will find the idea of spontaneity to be more alien to the liberal framework than the above implies. Certainly, the space that liberal theory could make for, and significance it can give to, spontaneity and a sense of life lying open ahead is more

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23 E.g., Sandel 1982.

24 For instance, see the discussion in Kymlicka 1988.

25 It is worth noting that this contrast appeals to a stereotypical, not accurate, depiction of contemporary village life: all but the most remote of rural lives contains some possibility for encounters in my sense. I return to this shortly.

26 See Rawls 1971. See also, on experiments in living Mill 1859/1991; for a discussion of Mill's crisis and the psychology of his account, see Anderson 1991.

limited than, say, the existentialists with their embrace of freedom in the moment.[27] So, too, the careful reflection and consideration that goes into a change of conception on a liberal picture differs from the kind of spontaneity, chance, and experiment that I describe.[28] Still, it would be a mistake to regard the liberals' conceptualization of fundamental freedoms as only concerned with the pursuit of persisting conceptions of the good, and not at all about the ways in which life lies open ahead. There are good reasons for liberal political philosophers to be concerned, as well, with spontaneity, given its links to the liberal conception of freedom and especially our autonomy. Encounters, I have argued, are important in the process of forming and revising our conceptions of the good and in shaping the kinds of people we want to be or become. Precisely such a role of associations in our self-development has been raised by philosophers in the context of associations 'proper' and in defences of freedom of association, one of the fundamental liberal freedoms. [29] The people with whom we surround ourselves deeply affect what we value, which aspects of our character are brought to the fore, which activities we engage in, and how we think about ourselves and our lives, in ways that influence the formation of our identities and our sense of ourselves.

Yet our usual audience, those close to us, also inhibit radical change in the ways in which we present ourselves, or revisions in the goals we pursue. When surrounded by those who know us, we are committed to taking a certain 'line': there are expectations from the other as to how we will act, what we value, and who we are, which we tend to try to live up to.[30] We better be sure, too, before we venture changes in front of our familiar audiences: the friend or lover may be disappointed, or scornful, if we don't keep to the new line that we adopt. The importance of our encounters, then, lies in the openness they provide. Our encounters, just like our closer associations, play a role in the formation of our self, our ways of life, and our values – but their role is a discrete one, stemming from the lack of commitment and variety that our encounters provide.

The second of the reframings begins from a challenge to the reach of the freedom defence. Are valuable encounters are found only in a *city* life? Does the value of encounters, their contribution to our freedom, truly get instantiated anywhere else? Here lies a key point of divergence between the freedom defence of our encounters

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[27] E.g. Sartre 1946/2007. With thanks to Elizabeth Frazer and Cécile Laborde for raising this point.

[28] See, for instance, the description of the process of changing a way of life in Anderson 1991.

[29] For instance, Shiffrin 2004 examines the role of associations in developing our ideas and thoughts. The shaping of our selves with others, as I describe, is more pervasive still.

[30] Again, on the idea of taking a line, see for instance Goffman 1967.

and those based on urban theory and architecture regarding the importance of encountering strangers on city streets and other public spaces for democracy – and from Young's defence of the *ideal* city life of embracing difference. Namely, I reject the thought that only cities provide spaces of the kind we need, at least for freedom as spontaneity. The suburb and small town too are filled with rich spaces of encounters, such as playgrounds, school gates, small shops, pubs, and train stations. Suburbs, admittedly, may be less diverse in terms of income and race or ethnicity than are some parts of cities, but there is diversity enough in terms of ways of life and in terms of audiences for our performance, for us to try on and try out aspects of ourselves and new narratives.

I resist, then, a form of what we can call architectural determinism that would imply that valuable encounters with others can only be found in spaces with very particular design: namely, dense urban neighbourhoods with a mix of residential and commercial property.[31] With that determinism comes a misplaced despair, at least for this dimension of freedom, about the suburb: take Alan Ryan's declaration that, 'suburbanization as it has taken place under the impulse of the motorcar and a general hostility to planned land use…is not only an aesthetic disaster but a social and therefore a political one'.[32] Of course, a car-bound suburban life will be more limited in its fleeting encounters with strangers on the streets. But for a life characterised by the dimension of freedom I discuss, it is not only or even mostly the city street that counts. I insist on the importance of the mundane spaces of a life beyond the city streets and public squares that shape the imaginings of democratic theories, especially the spaces often filled with women and children, from waiting rooms, to parks and school gates.

Indeed, even villages can offer a life rich enough in encounters. Many commute from villages into towns and cities to work, so opening up spaces for encounters beyond those to whom they are close. The villages themselves offer some scope for encounters if they aren't too small. Admittedly, some rural lives will lack much by way of encounters. Very few people, though, live in such hyper rural places and not all lives have all good things: there are joys that a very rural life has that a city life lacks and vice versa. Most of us have some access to encounters then, although some have a life much richer in encounters than others. Crucially, though, living in a city is far from the only difference-making factor in determining the richness of one's encounters and the scope for spontaneity. Compare the city-dweller who works from home, is childfree,

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[31] Following on from Jacobs 1961, an air of this form of determinism sometimes appears in political philosophy's discussion of encounters and democracy.

[32] Ryan 1998, p. 324.

and prefers solo hobbies, to someone living in a suburb but in a job filled with meeting new people, who has children, whose free time is spent in cafes, community centres, allotments, playgrounds, or bars.

III. A SOCIAL ETHIC OF ENCOUNTERS

This dimension of freedom of openness and possibility is something that we can only attain together. That much is obvious: we need others to encounter. Further, some of these others must be sufficiently open to our interacting with them if we are to try things out or on fully – to rehearse new narratives and ideas, to reveal and conceal different aspects of ourselves, and so on. For encounters to be valuable in the ways described above thus requires certain social and political conditions. One could imagine a regime sufficiently oppressive and totalitarian that any encounter was fraught with dangers of making some slip and being reported to the state authorities. There, encounters – as well as the other spaces of one's life – would provide little freedom.[33]

Still, while the value of encounters is not universal, we need not be in some ideal or perfectly just society in order for our encounters to provide a sense of possibility and an openness to a life.[34] To some extent, the freer the society, then the greater the diversity of encounters that we could have and the greater the resulting openness of a life, given the absence of state repression on different ways of life. With too few encounters, and too limited a range of people to encounter, we will find this dimension of our lives, and this dimension of freedom, diminished. But we do not need to have maximal access to varied encounters in order to sustain this dimension of freedom. A cacophony of ever more possibilities and an endless stream of different people, beyond a certain level, looks unlikely to keep on increasing our sense of the openness of life and its possibilities. Instead, I suggest that encounters provide some of this dimension of freedom when societies enable a range of lives and possibilities and make sufficient space for encounters.

It isn't only the absence of state repression on which our access to encounters, and their providing a dimension of a free life, depends. First, our encounters occur in particular kinds of spaces: spaces where we can meet others outside of our homes and in unplanned and unexpected ways, as Section IV will explore. These spaces include

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[33] One might think here of the compelling description of the greengrocer's sign, and what might happen if he took it down, in Havel 1978/2018.

[34] In contrast to the vision in Young 1990 of the ideal of affirming difference then, the freedom value of encounters is widely realized.

parks, streets, and public transport, but also – and especially, given the extended conception of encounters in this paper– cafes, corner shops, pubs, school gates, and workplaces.[35] For many of these places to remain viable, we must use them – and use them in ways that enable encounters.[36] If people don't frequent these spaces, then they will not be much use as a space of encounters, and some will shut altogether.

Second, the perception that there is a diversity of possibilities of ways to live a life, which we can gain from our encounters, depends upon people feeling free to openly live different kinds of lives and explore different possibilities. That also requires that there is not too much social pressure against such explorations. Social norms, and the attendant willingness of others to penalise departures from what is expected, can repress the visibility of certain kinds of choices, even in the absence of legal sanctions or other forms of state repression.

These latter conditions raise the question of what might be required from individuals in order to secure this dimension of a free life. Do I have an obligation to keep using the poor-quality corner shop to keep it open for the benefit of all as a space for encounters, even if I'd rather use a grocery delivery service? Must I engage in conversations with acquaintances and strangers, even when I'd rather not?[37] Should I choose a less mainstream life in order to boost the diversity of others' encounters? I suspect that the freedom-based defence of encounters cannot ground individual moral duties as strong as this. We have no obligation to use the local corner shop, nor talk to any particular person, even if they try to talk to us, let alone adopt an interesting way of life, simply to promote other's sense of the possibilities of a life. Instead, given the fundamental right of freedom of association we are free not to associate with others, even in these loose or fleeting ways.

Yet, still, we can only enjoy this dimension of freedom if enough of us participate. Given the role of our encounters in our development of our selves and for a free human life, I thus suggest that a flourishing free life of encounters is a collective achievement and one that we have an interest in securing. As a result, it might be that we have civic duties of a more diffuse, and shared, kind. A tolerant and free liberal society requires

[35] The former set are more familiar in work on the democratic value of encounters, e.g., Kohn 2020; Parkinson 2012. I return to this work and others in the next section.

[36] One way that we might fail to do this is if we sit in cafes looking at screens rather than ever engaging, as depicted in Turkle 2011, e.g. p. 156.

[37] Brownlee 2020 addresses this question, in but from a different angle. Here, the motivation is the importance of encounters for a free and spontaneous human life, and the duties we bear, I will suggest, are much more diffuse. Brownlee's defence of the importance of our interactions would add to, and significantly strengthen, the duties I suggest here.

that the majority of citizens behave in certain ways and have certain attitudes: that they possess particular liberal virtues or adopt particular civic norms.[38] Take the importance of being tolerant for the attainment of religious freedom. Too much intolerance compromises religious freedom even in the absence of a state enacting laws. Consider, too, J.S. Mill's observation that widespread social stigma against unpopular views can undermine free speech just as much – or more – than the law.[39] This stigma might result from citizens failing to be sufficiently openminded or having too weak a commitment to a culture of free speech. Without the right virtues or civic norms, a liberal state may not be able to properly secure citizens' freedom.

Likewise, sufficiently widespread alienation from the shared life of one's neighbourhood, or disengagement from contact with others, can undermine the aspect of a free life found in our encounters. If enough of us don't do our bit, by making the decision to go to them, then we will lose spaces like the corner shop or café and the opportunity for encounters that they provide.[40] So, too, the value of our encounters can be threatened by too much intolerance. For our encounters to have value, we need to be sufficiently open-minded about others and their differences. In turn, however, encounters are also thought to encourage these very dispositions or norms of being tolerant of, and open to, others who differ from us.[41] Happily, then, we may find a virtuous circle: our encounters with one another can support the very attitudes that we need for a rich life of encounters.

We might have as a result a civic duty to engage in the life of our community or to display some openness to making loose connections, in order to support this aspect of a rich and free life. There is an important difference, however, between encounter-threatening civic disengagement and alienation on the one hand and, on the other, intolerance of a kind that threatens speech and religion. Sufficient intolerance in the latter case, at least collectively, may interfere with others' exercise of their freedom

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[38] For a survey on the importance of how citizens behave, see Kymlicka and Norman 1994. On whether to characterise these as norms or virtues, see McTernan 2014; and on why it matters, see McTernan 2022.

[39] Mill is against legal penalties on speech, but he takes it that the social stigma attached to unpopular views undermines freedom too. Indeed, he states: 'the chief mischief of the legal penalties is that they strengthen the social stigma. It is that stigma which is really effective' (Mill 1859/1991, p. 37).

[40] It is a complex question how to best distribute these duties, especially where others don't do their share. For one discussion of the latter issue, see Miller 2013, ch. 9.

[41] On tolerating difference and city life, see Young 1990, ch. 8. Encounters might also help diminish affective political distance, a phenomena depicted in Talisse 2021.

of speech or thought. In contrast, not doing my part in sustaining our lives together as rich in encounters makes no direct attack on another's basic freedoms. Still, the role of encounters is significant enough that we ought to do our part to sustain them where they are under threat of becoming restricted or scarce. A geninuely free society, where people change and revise their conceptions of themselves and what they value, needs a good enough life of encounters.

IV. ON THE SPACES OF ENCOUNTERS AND GOVERNMENTS

Finally, to the role of the state in, and the importance of space to, our encounters. Unlike unions, marriages, political movements, and even Scouting groups, encounters aren't usually *directly* targeted by the state in being subjected to bans and restrictions of various kinds. There are exceptions. Lockdowns and social distancing rules were an important instance, if a justified one. Sometimes, too, governments seeking to protect themselves from protests and uprisings impose curfews and restrictions on public gatherings. But there is more to the account of how states influence our encounters than this. Below, I draw on urban and architectural theory to gesture towards the ways in which our encounters are substantially shaped by the spaces to which we have access.[42]

A state's decisions can change in particular which encounters are likely, the richness of this aspect of our associational lives, and the equality of citizens' access to opportunities for encounters. To show this, I'll offer three illustrative examples. The first is the substantial body of research in urban and architectural theory into the features of public spaces that promote (positive) encounters amongst citizens – and those that diminish them. Political theorists, considering the important role of public space for our democratic culture, take up these insights.[43] For instance, one might study Jane Jacobs and the revival of her ideas in 'New Urbanism', proposing

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[42] The missing piece of the discussion to follow is the internet, which is at once – potentially – a rich source of encounters with others but at the same time often constructed in ways that make these encounters negative or that otherwise frustrate the ability to use online spaces to present ourselves in different ways. They do so either by making doing so too commitment free such that there is no real trying something on, or by giving us a sense of surveillance and judgement that hampers our feeling free to try something out. However, examining the various permutations of our online lives lies beyond this article's scope. I would observe that it seems there is some support for thinking that the internet isn't sufficient for the provision of encounters and their freedom: this aspect of life is one thing that many missed during lockdown, despite spending far more time online.

[43] See, notably, Parkinson 2012. See also Zacka 2020 on ways in which urban planning and design can promote or diminish encounters.

mixed-use neighbourhoods, with residential buildings and retail mixed together, and the encouragement of pedestrians, in order to increase our encounters and positive social interactions.[44] By contrast, one might picture a suburb dominated by cars, designed in a way that dissuades walking. While I've suggested that it is not only city streets that provide a rich space of encounters, states tend to play a significant role in design decisions over a wide range of public and other shared spaces, for instance, through local authority planning decisions and in allocating funding.[45]

Second, the ways in which public transport and public spaces are configured affects the distribution of opportunities to associate by influencing who has can use or access the spaces where we can meet with others outside of the home in informal and unplanned ways.[46] Lockdowns illustrated this connection in denying people the freedom to rest while out and about, including in some places by physically taping off benches and reducing access to public or open toilets. This limited the ability for some people to socialise outside of their homes even where some outdoors contact was permitted. Pregnant women, those who were less able to walk, or those who needed to stop and rest, had their associational lives more substantially diminished. But this consideration is not restricted to lockdowns. Some cities and spaces are far better designed than others in terms of enabling people to easily move around or to rest. Some places provide many public toilets, others very few. Some have ample public transport while others do not. So, too, the spaces in which we encounter each other can feel more or less welcoming to some groups than to others – and are more, or less, safe. As such, the physical fabric of our lives affects not only where I encounter people, but who I encounter – and who gets to have such encounters. Often, our shared spaces end up less diverse than they could be owing to these design decisions, so restricting access to encounters for some, and the diversity in our encounters for all.

Third, government policy can shape the places in which citizens are, or are not, likely to encounter one another beyond the public square, parks, and streets. A crucial divergence of a freedom-based defence of the value of encounters, as opposed to one based on the social and democratic value, is that its scope includes as central

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[44] See, for instance: Jacobs 1961; Wood, Giles-Corti, & Bulsara 2012. For research suggesting that strolling and encountering neighbours boosts community, see Lund 2002. For a more sceptical but hopeful review of relevant empirical literature see Sander 2002.

[45] Elaborating on the many ways in which states so intervene, see Shill 2020.

[46] Young 1990, p. 246, offers one discussion of this, contrasting dense city living to the suburbs, or urban spaces divided by functions, and the impact on the life of the housewife, in terms of marginalisation, isolation and boredom. I add here, it affects too their imagining of different possibilities, their sense of the openness of a life.

encounters that take place outside of strictly public spaces: for the freedom defence, our central encounters include those in cafes, bars, and workplaces. So too, to recall, it is not only the dense urban environment or the ideal form of the city that provides us with this dimension of freedom and so with a sense of a life being open. Those living in suburbs and villages too, encounter others in places like school gates, cafes, and shops – and, often, in the workplace.[47]

To give an example where government policy thus has relevance in securing a rich life of encounters, or in diminishing it, take working from home. A government could encourage working from home. It might fund the relevant infrastructure to do so such as high-speed internet, but provide less funding for public transport networks, resulting in a worse commuting experience or rising ticket prices that dissuade people from travelling to work. A government could pay for advertisements that encourage home working, provide financial incentives to companies to set up working from home options for staff, or offer tax breaks to those working from home. Alternatively, a government could adopt the exact opposite set of policies, and urge people back to the office through its taxation schemes, public transport funding, public pronouncements and various incentives.

As a second example, consider the high street and corner shops. Alan Ryan places corner shops, along with pubs and cafes, amongst 'the unofficial institutions of city life'.[48] If these are replaced by a fleet of bikes, then we lose something of a city's collective life. So, too, though for the broader hollowing out of the high streets of small towns and villages. Governments can provide funding for technology start-ups, including for grocery delivery apps. Or, by contrast, they could cut the business rates for local shops such as corner shops, or provide funding for local authorities to do so, when such shops appear to be struggling.

Thus, there are a range of ways in which a state can affect the range and distribution of valuable opportunities to encounter one another. In so doing, the government is creating the conditions for some forms of encounter to flourish and for others to falter, and not just in public squares. It does not follow that we require, let alone have a right to, a particular number of park benches, mixed-use neighbourhoods, or open workspaces: again, we ought not to become architectural determinists. For one

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[47] The importance of businesses has not gone unnoticed in urban theory, see for instance, Jacobs 1961 when describing the right kind of streets for valuable encounters. Workplaces provide a mix of connections: some too close or with too much power over for valuable experiment (one's boss, for example), but others distant enough to create possibilities, like a person from another team or who works on a different floor.

[48] Ryan 1998.

thing, given that a rich life of encounters can be realised in multiple ways, there can't be a clear answer on, say, how many park benches or what structure of workplaces is required. Rather, a state could provide valuable possibilities to encounter each other with a myriad of different planning and funding decisions.

All the same, collectively, state decisions in these areas have a profound impact on what our lives together look like, whether we have a rich life of encounters, and who has access to streets and the other spaces where encounters are likely to occur. It would be advisable, then, to engage in some assessment of the overall impact of policies and local government decisions on the availability of, and fair access to, opportunities to have encounters with fellow citizens. Importantly, too, the policies in question go beyond the usual focus on parks and streets. Grocery apps, policies around working from home, the funding of public transport, amongst many other decisions, also shape this aspect of our lives together. Of course, the value of our encounters is far from the only thing that should guide any state decision, but this is one more consideration to weigh in the mix when determining policy.

Some might prefer to frame the above in the language of public goods, along with clean air and public parks.[49] That isn't the line taken in this article. Many of the sites in which the kinds of encounters that matter take place – and the encounters themselves – are poorly characterised as public goods proper, that is, goods that are non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Encounters in cafes, bars, community spaces, school gate meet-ups and the like are something from which people can be, and are, excluded rather than necessarily open to all. Still, our encounters are valuable to us and are something that the state is in the business of shaping. When a state or local government makes these decisions about park benches or zoning or business rates, it shapes this dimension of our associational lives, even if that is not the intended outcome of its policies. A state encourages us into encountering each other – or it discourages us from doing so. At the least, then, it ought to be a relevant concern of a state when its decisions distribute the opportunities to encounter others unevenly, such that some have far greater access to this dimension of a free life than others, with some having scarce opportunities to encounter others outside of the home.

To conclude, then, this paper defends the significance and value of our encounters, and the expansiveness of the encounters that count. Our encounters have value not only because of their social and democratic benefits but also because of their importance to living a free life, in providing a distinctive dimension of our freedom. It

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[49] For a discussion of public goods and public parks, and the different ways to justify public goods, see Kohn 2020.

is through our encounters that we have opportunities to try on or out new ideas about what direction to take, new narratives of our lives, or different ways of presenting ourselves. More broadly, we gain a sense of a life's possibilities and of its openness: a sense that our future is not altogether pre-set and determined in advance. This, I have argued, is an often overlooked, but essential, dimension of our freedom.

Access to a rich life of such encounters, however, is a collective, not individual, achievement. This dimension of freedom depends on enough citizens doing their share in sustaining the spaces in which we encounter one another; in engaging in encounters; and in being tolerant of, and open to, difference. Further, a wide range of government policies are salient beyond those touching on our public spaces, including those that encourage working from home, or that support the tech start-ups that hollow out our high streets and cause the corner shops to close.

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The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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