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Two Concepts of Liberty: An Analysis of Berlin's Seminal Essay

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Abstract

Sir Isaiah Berlin, in his 1958 essay and inaugural lecture, "Two Concepts of Liberty," expands on the ideals of liberty that were synthesized and inculcated by earlier political philosophers. The essay initiates and details an outline of an idealized liberty with two distinct branches: positive and negative. Although the essay is a bit controversial, producing such detractors as Charles Taylor, this seminal piece has staying power and can only be enhanced, not nullified.

Two Concepts of Liberty: An Analysis of Berlin's Seminal Essay

Sir Isaiah Berlin, in his 1958 essay and inaugural lecture, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” expands on the ideals of liberty that were synthesized and inculcated by earlier political philosophers. The essay initiates and details an outline of an idealized liberty with two distinct branches: positive and negative. Although the essay is a bit controversial, producing such detractors as Charles Taylor, this seminal piece has staying power and can only be enhanced, not nullified.

In order to fully comprehend Berlin’s dichotomy theory, we have to understand the history of certain views of liberty and freedom¹. Frustrated with the then-current views of liberty, Berlin saw the need to expand the concept and break it into two distinct parts – *freedom from* human interference and *freedom to* do as I please within a civil society. The essay expands on specific theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill, among others, yet we must begin our trek through history back to the times of Socrates and Plato.

In *Crito*, as told by Plato, Socrates discusses his terminal fate with a persistent supporter named Crito. As Crito would like to assist Socrates in escaping from the plight of Socrates’ impending death due to perceived *injustice*, the noble Socrates vehemently denies such an attempt to avoid the carrying out of his death because, in his view of justice, retaliation is required injustice and is thus not a proper response.

Much of Socrates’ reply is based on his own concept of a *social contract*, one that entails the implied duties of an inhabitant of land governed by a specific authority. Socrates goes on to explain that if one chooses to reside in a specific government’s region of authority, as well as enjoy life and rear children in the same, then he or she is displaying an agreement of the

¹ Berlin, for the discussion of two concepts of liberty, considers freedom and liberty one and the same. In this essay, I will adhere to Berlin’s amalgam.

specified laws, and by not accepting one's own sentencing according to the arranged government, one is "violating the compacts and agreements made with us...victimized neither by coercion nor by misrepresentation" (Stewart, 11).

The social contract theory of government was further expanded upon and championed by many great political philosophers. John Locke, in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, explains that man or woman gives up the laws of nature to a specific magistrate under a civilized society. He states that, "every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation to everyone of that society to submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it" (Stewart, 29). However, this agreement is tacit, and when the inhabitant chooses to, "quit the said possession, he is at liberty to go and incorporate himself into any other commonwealth, or agree with others to begin a new one" (Stewart, 31).

When David Hume discusses the social contract theory in "Of the Original Contract," he speaks of the compounded, yet differing views of *allegiance* and *fidelity*. Hume argues that we require, as a civilized society, an organized system of laws and an arrangement of leaders and judges from which to furnish equitable justice. The needs of the justice system require a faith-based allegiance, but this need not be in the form of a blind fidelity. Many royal monarchies were first "derived from usurpation and violence," (Stewart, 47) hence each individual must understand that a promise to continue the essential wrath of the monarchy, regardless of the current level of calm and fairness, is a promise to permit a one-sided level of unruliness and violence as the current ruling guard sees fit. Ultimately, the inhabitant of a government's ruling region has expressed tacit consent by remaining under the ruling authority, but this union can cause stress when the expressed consent moves from allegiance in support of a unified government that is

able to distribute fair and equal justice to an unbridled fidelity that allows for a faith-based system without questioning the ongoing actions of authority.

Hanna F. Pitkin argues, in “Obligation and Consent, II,” that there are four questions or concepts related to a social contract theory that must be answered or discussed, respectfully. These concepts concern the notions of: when and when not to obey²; whom to obey³; if there is a true obligation or mere coercion⁴; and why there is or is not a justifiable obligation or a duty to obey⁵ (Stewart, 50). Each of these questions is equally important and leads us to our analysis of Berlin’s argument that there are, indeed, two concepts of liberty – positive and negative branches.

Berlin considers negative liberty, “the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others” (Stewart, 90). Standing alone, this seems as if it is a simple concept. However, it must be further narrowed to emphasize that the obstruction must be human involvement, not mere physical limitations. If I am to be truly free, then I need to be free from the coercion of others. We can envision a driver within an automobile, tacitly agreeing to the laws of the region’s government by mere residence and via enjoying the ups and downs of a daily life, roaming a highway. We cannot say that friction, disastrous climatological elements, nor gravity are imposing themselves upon the freedom of the driver, but rather the coordinated effort of speed limits, driving habits of others, and the money required to purchase a specific vehicle – or any vehicle, impose upon the freedom of the inhabitant driving the vehicle. However, there is a give and take of freedom within a civilized society, and most will agree that the safety of others produces more of a benefit than the loss of freedom from traffic law – assuming the traffic laws are civil and just.

² The limits of obligation

³ The locus of sovereignty

⁴ The difference between legitimate authority and mere coercion

⁵ The justification of obligation

It is true that the invention of money was the beginning of a partial devastation of freedom.

While it is generally agreeable that a currency is needed in order to readily transfer items beyond the means of mere barter, the concept of money has evoked an endless desire to obtain more than an individual needs and overproduce for profit; this has outgrown the rational desires specifically labeled by John Locke. Also, while Locke seems to feel more open about the ability of an inhabitant to readily leave a society united under a civil government, John T. Bookman states that Locke's response to Pitkin's fourth question is that "we have given our consent to the institution of civil society which includes, but is not coterminous with, a government" (Bookman, 359). This would seem to indicate that an individual could either accept the concept of a society which chooses to utilize a currency as a method of exchange, or simply refuse to accept the notion and flee into oblivion, still guided by the contract of being within a state of nature.

The main concern of money's coercion is that it leads the individual to seek more than could be consumed within a given time without spoil. Over-harvesting of farmland and over-production of any item that strips away from nature, in turn, leads to an abundance of supply that will simply be wasted or will be sold for profit. This brings us to the ideas of property and capitalism; according to Locke, the inhabitant should only consume that which is enough for him and his family to thrive within a given society. Yet, what happens when the farmer cultivates more than needed? According to Locke's theory, it is wrong of the farmer to labor and produce more than is necessary, and thus the size of the property is definitively engrossing. The farmer may rightfully defend his or her property, but the size of the land would be in dispute.

If we wish to follow Berlin's notion that we are to be free from coercion of others, then a for-profit enterprise does limit freedom, as the money or barter that we must produce in order to

purchase or exchange for the crops of the farmer may be more difficult to obtain than the labor we could have used to produce the crops ourselves. Although we can each specialize in a trade, those who are unable to learn a trade or, simply, lack of innovation-inducing ideals such as intellectual property rights could lead to economic inequality. Bookman goes on to explain that money opened the doors to an emergence of economic classes, which “strain relations among people” and that “human relations in the state of nature have been strained by economic inequality, and a desire to protect property is a major reason for quitting the state of nature and instituting civil society” (Bookman, 364).

To see how this corresponds with Berlin’s concept of negative liberty, we must further analyze Berlin’s argument. Berlin feels that poverty can be defined in several ways, yet in order to truly consider an infringement upon freedom, human influence, without personal disability, must be analyzed. As money creates strain and economic inequality, in turn, it then creates poverty and thus limits freedom. Adhering to a strict sense of negative theory, money does indeed impose upon inhabitants who cannot obtain the capital to thrive in a barter-free society.

Naturally, the notion of negative freedom comes with the caveat that it is nearly impossible to create a fine line from which to establish a truly free society. As Berlin states, “we cannot remain absolutely free, and must give up some of our liberty to preserve the rest...that which a man cannot give up without offending against the essence of his human nature” (Stewart, 92). This gives us further insight in Berlin’s theory, but it still does not provide a decisive way to view liberty. In quoting John Stuart Mill, Berlin espouses that innovation and originality are to be protected and are goals from which one can derive liberty. Berlin builds on the concept of a strong and free individual, “and that truth can be found, and such character can be bred, only in conditions of freedom” (Stewart, 92).

This is where we begin to blend the concepts of negative and positive liberty. While Mill was correct in stating that truth and character are distinct features of freedom, it should be understood that there is a difference between the interference of others (negative) and the extent to which a civil government mentally infringes on liberty by not providing an individual the ability to do as he or she pleases because of external misinformation (positive). Berlin feels that the latter idea can be twisted and conformed as needed by a government – even a democracy, such that one is led to believe that he or she maintains a mastery of his or her own life, respectively, when there could be an unknowing collectivized nature within the current establishment which is bending the supposed rational outlook of the actor. In short, positive liberty concerns the question: Is my goal of self-mastery really my goal or a built-up identity presented before me by a collective authority?

In Friedrich Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra," the limited evolving status of society contains an ever-apathetic being who simply seeks security and the right to a life that seems free, but it truly led by an autonomous government under the guise of a free world. The *last man* is a passionless character who simply obeys the ideal of the government and lifestyle presented before him, and sees no such reason to challenge authority, utilize originality, or even speak up for himself; he merely rides the wave of the current life, content with its ups and downs and predetermined fate. To Nietzsche, this is an atrocity that can only be rectified through the death of such thinking, which inherently led to the proclamation by Zarathustra of the *death of God*, whom Nietzsche was not entirely hopeful that civilization could move past. If the last man could move past the desire of accepting both his fate and the puppeteer work of a supernatural being, then it could be possible that humanity reach the state of the *Ubermensch*, roughly translated as Over Man – Superman – a realm of reality that is above the average man, and mocks such

generic thinking of the last man. Through Zarathustra, Nietzsche clearly states to the people, “I teach you the Superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed” (Nietzsche, 6). T.K. Seung, on the subject of Zarathustra’s preaching to the people, states, “trapped in their nest of modern comfort, the market crowd shows no sign of spiritual vitality to break out of the limits of humanity” (Seung, 3). The apathy and somber tone of waiting for death to achieve greatness is, perhaps, an ideal that angered Nietzsche, as he felt that we may thrive on earth and expose our soul to the worldly treasures that are before us, yet dormant in our mind, and stagnant in our lack of creativity.

While it might be a stretch to believe that Berlin pondered the *Übermensch*, the idea of the last man defines the type of hold that a government could have on an individual, especially in a collective realm. Such apathy easily leads to a false belief in freedom, with goals predetermined and an outlook dependent upon the needs of the current government. It will be very difficult for any civilized society to remove itself wholeheartedly from a non-stimulating government and concept of a spiritual world when the inhabitants simply accept minimal change of direction as the response to veering off-course. Positive liberty, as defined by Berlin and expanded upon here, is an ugly misfortune that needs to be self-identified in order to renounce.

Positive liberty also blends with Locke’s notion that an enslaved man cannot truly make decisions encompassing his freedom. As an enslaved person, the ability to choose as one wishes has been lost, and as such, one cannot rightly say that he or she chooses to make decisions when each decision has an inherent weight upon it from the domineering slaveholder. Bridging Locke’s specification of an enslaved person’s inability to maximize or even comprehend liberty with Berlin’s concept of positive liberty and Nietzsche’s notion of the *Übermensch*, an individual in an egalitarian, socialist, or even democratic society can unknowingly be enslaved to a

collectivist agenda, and thus cannot truly be liberated without surpassing the identity of the last man and obtaining a eugenic transvaluation⁶ encompassing negative liberty and seeking empirical reasoning.

Charles Taylor aptly points out a flaw in Berlin's concept of negative liberty. As Berlin leans towards a Hobbesian strict view of negative liberty, one in which the actor should not be deterred from any external force – essentially complete freedom to do as he or she pleases – Taylor recognizes internalized factors, such as; fear of public speaking; losing comfort; spite; and revenge. While each of these issues is truly problematic for the actor, Taylor paints the picture that these are internal dilemmas that may hinder, on differing levels, the extent of liberty afforded to the individual. Berlin neglects to speak in depth on the matter of internal strife, and thus Taylor boldly states that the concept of negative liberty is incomplete without understanding the internal strife of the actor, which may include rational and realized fears, unrealized deterrents – positive liberty strains, and irrational fears that are internalized and limit freedom. While I agree with Taylor that the broad concept of negative liberty should be further defined to include internalized hindrances, I feel that Isaiah Berlin, the pluralist, was aware of such notions, yet did not expand on their importance because he might have considered them personal faults that need to be overcome. As Berlin notably discerned between physical characteristics that are not influenced by human interaction and that which does limit freedom, he may have considered mental instabilities on the same level as physical encumbrances that must be overcome or mitigated internally.

When writing about Isaiah Berlin, Henry Hardy, a writer who was monumental in compiling Berlin's writings into organized volumes, stated, "that there can be many different value-

⁶ Nietzsche uses the term *transvaluation of values* as a method to surpass Christianity and free oneself from the realm of its bent and all-encompassing vision. I will use the term as a shift of values from the supernatural

structures, many different moralities, without it being possible to rank them in an order of approximation to some ideal blueprint for human life” (Hardy, 15). This fact can not be overstated, and I think that if we were to further analyze Berlin’s writing, we would see that he understood the problems with negative liberty that were espoused by Taylor, yet the original essay was simply too broad to specifically state the idea of an internalized blockage to freedom. We are certainly influenced by society and government’s long arm, but freedom is contingent upon self-actualization and the ability to stand up for oneself and others, as needed. The more learned the individual, the more he or she is able to grasp the detriment that irrational fears impose upon one’s freedom. In a Communistic society, the ability to learn is limited to what the government aims for its inhabitants to know; however, I feel that it is incumbent upon every able-minded and able-bodied individual to seek knowledge at all expense, to learn about the ways of the world and overcome the perceived realities portrayed by government, institutions, news media, as well as any authority figure that aims to lecture and impose reasoning. It is most wise to listen to all points of view in an open-minded manner, and then have the courage to take a hard stance when needed.

The concept of positive liberty is meaningful and direct. Again, a knowledgeable society is the only society that will be able to counter a government or other force that is limiting freedom by imposing a collectivized mentality and common-good that is untested. While we all can agree that certain categories of the population need to be protected from harm, government intervention should not be dictating the attitude of the inhabitants and forming a nation of Oblomovs⁷ and superfluous men.

Nietzsche was really onto something; if one is able to see through the smoke and over the clouds,

persuasion to an Aristotelian this-world mentality.

⁷ This is the Russian character which is akin to Nietzsche’s last man.

the limits to knowledge and self-actualization are endless. I certainly do not see a major change in my lifetime, but I can see that a time will come when individuals in all nations will begin to think for themselves and not need the irrational strain of an imposing government and international authority. It takes primary leaders of a magnitude such as Isaiah Berlin to present thought-provoking ideals that lay the foundation for future theories and modes of thought. On Berlin, we can savor the words of Henry Hardy: “no short account could do justice to the many-faceted significance of this remarkable man” (Hardy, 15).

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