

**Unstable Equilibrium: Positive  
and Negative Liberty for Isaiah Berlin**

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In his landmark essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Isaiah Berlin identifies two distinct conceptions of liberty that have emerged from various philosophical traditions: negative and positive liberty. For Berlin, theorists of negative and positive liberty differ with respect to the divergent questions they ask when determining conditions of freedom or unfreedom. Negative liberty theorists are centrally concerned with the question, “[What is the] minimum area of personal freedom which must on no account be violated”?<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast, positive liberty theorists determine conditions of freedom or unfreedom by asking, “By whom am I ruled?”<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, to be free is to be one’s own master, to make autonomous choices about the purpose and practices of one’s life, and to bear the responsibility for those choices.<sup>4</sup>

Berlin’s essay has been widely praised for clarifying important distinctions between conflicting meanings of the term liberty.<sup>5</sup> The essay has become one of Berlin’s most widely read and influential publications. Often, the essay is interpreted as an endorsement of negative liberty and a rejection of positive conceptions of liberty. Furthermore, Berlin is frequently

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 196.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>5</sup> In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin uses the terms liberty and freedom interchangeably (194). Following Berlin, I do the same.

grouped together by other philosophers with negative libertarians.<sup>6</sup> However, on my view, reading and classifying Berlin in this way is a mistake. Berlin neither fully endorses nor fully rejects either positive or negative liberty. Instead, he recognizes that each conception of liberty has built into it unique kinds of risks, which decent societies must acknowledge and seek to contain.

In this paper, I argue that the tendency to misread Berlin as a negative liberty theorist is (at least in part) a result of his well-known exchange with Charles Taylor. Reading Berlin in conversation with Taylor falsely forces Berlin into the position of a negative libertarian. Furthermore, such a reading rests on a confusion about the primary source of Berlin and Taylor's disagreement, which is ultimately over the viability of a teleological notion of the self. Thus, reading Berlin in conversation with Taylor results in a misunderstanding of Berlin's position. Further, the tendency to read Berlin as a negative liberty theorist leads to a view of Berlin in which lack of constraints on action is centered in his work. However, concern with constraints on action was not his primary preoccupation. More than anything, Berlin's work was animated by his commitment to pluralism. In this paper, I hope to show that pluralism was his foundational value (making him more of a hedgehog than he might admit) and that his notion of freedom follows from that commitment.

Finally, Berlin's greatness as a thinker is in large part a function of his ability to recognize the value of many ways of thinking and being in the world. He rejects easy answers to difficult questions and instead asks his readers to dwell in a more ambiguous, ambivalent place. As a result, reading Berlin can be an unsettling and unsatisfying experience for those

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<sup>6</sup> For one example of such a grouping, see Carter, Ian, "Positive and Negative Liberty", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>>. Here, Berlin is described as a leading theorist of negative liberty, in contradistinction to theorists and advocates of positive liberty.

who seek certainty and final solutions. Reading Berlin as a negative liberty theorist—rather than a cautious theorist of liberty in all of its dangerous forms—discourages the more interesting, unsettling reading that is possible otherwise.

*Reading Berlin as a Negative Liberty Theorist:*

For a variety of reasons, Berlin's essay has been read by some as a defense of negative conceptions of liberty and an objection to all positive conceptions of liberty. On my view, there are at least three potentially significant factors that contribute to such a misunderstanding of Berlin's position. First, while the essay discusses the dangers of both negative and positive conceptions of liberty, the discussion of the risks associated with negative liberty is extremely short, in comparison to the longer explication of the dangers of certain conceptions of positive liberty. Second, the historical context in which the essay was written affected the tone and focus of the essay, which in another circumstance might have been written differently. Finally, after the publication of Charles Taylor's famous response to the essay, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," a tendency to read Berlin and Taylor in dialogue with one another obscured the subtleties in Berlin's essay, resulting in a misreading of Berlin as a negative-liberty theorist. In this section, I discuss each of these difficulties in turn.

In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin identifies dangers associated with both negative and positive conceptions of positive liberty. However, when comparing the amount of text devoted to each of the dangers, his discussion of the dangers of negative liberty requires no more than two pages of text, while the remainder of the fifty page essay is devoted to discussing the dangers that arise from various conceptions of positive liberty. If the reader

assumes that the severity of the dangers imposed by each conception of freedom is proportional to the attention Berlin gives them, reading Berlin as a negative liberty theorist seems reasonable, if not completely justified.

However, Berlin does not himself endorse this kind of a reading of the text. In the introduction to *Liberty*, he explains that negative liberty, too, “is compatible with, and (so far as ideas influence conduct) has played its part in generating, great and lasting social evils.” He goes on to further explain,

Advocacy of non-interference (like ‘social Darwinism’) was, of course, used to support politically and socially destructive policies which armed the strong, the brutal and the unscrupulous against the humane and the weak, the able and ruthless against the less gifted and the less fortunate. *Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep.* The bloodstained story of economic individualism and unrestrained capitalist competition does not, I should have thought, today need stressing. Nevertheless, in view of the astonishing opinions which some of my critics have imputed to me, I should, perhaps, have been wise to underline certain parts of my argument. I should have made it clearer that the evils of unrestricted laissez-faire, and of the social and legal systems that permitted and encouraged it, led to brutal violations of ‘negative’ liberty.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for Berlin, one should not infer from his relative inattention to the dangers associated with negative liberty that he does not recognize the risk of abuse and perversion. Instead, Berlin claims that the dangers seemed too obvious to need much stating.

It is important to note, then, that neither the “proper form” of negative liberty, nor the “proper form” of positive liberty is, for Berlin, fundamentally problematic. Both conceptions can, however, when perverted and/or taken to their extremes result in the conditions of

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Introduction,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37. Italics mine.

unfreedom each was conceived to avoid.<sup>8</sup> He clarifies this idea in an interview with Beata Polanowska-Sygułska.

What I meant is that negative liberty, if pushed to its extreme means total laissez-faire, e.g. little children working in coal mines in the nineteenth century because the mine-owners are at liberty to hire whoever they wish on whatever terms they wish, provided it is a free contract; the parents of these wretched children presumably receive payment; and Lord Shaftesbury had to stop this awful practice. But in theory this is a perfectly correct interpretation of negative liberty, in its extreme form, ignoring any other values or humane conditions. This does mean that beginning with [negative] liberty in its proper form, you end with slavery. In the case of positive liberty, there is a perversion: positive liberty is an answer to the question 'Who is in charge, myself or some external agency?' If it is external, it is clearly a violation of positive liberty in its proper form... That is what I meant and I think it is stated [although] perhaps not as clearly as it should be.<sup>9</sup>

For Berlin, then, neither positive nor negative liberty properly conceived need be rejected out of hand. Both conceptions are liable to perversion or corruption such that they can ultimately be used to justify unfreedom.

Additionally, the historical context in which the essay was written had an effect on the tone and focus of the essay. The essay, originally written and delivered as a lecture in 1958, was deeply influenced in both tone and focus by the build up of the cold war. For personal and professional reasons, Berlin was acutely concerned with the political repression taking place in the USSR in the name of freedom and justice.<sup>10</sup> So much so that in his essay on the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 39. Berlin notes, "Each concept seems liable to perversion into the very vice which it was created to resist."

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygułska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amhearst: Prometheus Books, 2006), 84.

<sup>10</sup> See Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 24-36 and 135-169. In his youth, Berlin and his family were exiled from Russia and took up residence in London. His family were Latvian Jews and timber merchants. They fled an increasingly hostile Russia in 1920. Later, working for the British Foreign Office, Berlin returned to Russia under communist rule to "prepare a long despatch about American-Soviet-British relations in the post-war world" (ibid., 134). During his stay, Berlin witnessed isolation, surveillance, and coercion under the communist regime, which had a lasting effect on his intellectual preoccupations and publications.

dangers associated with both forms of liberty, Berlin was preoccupied with the perversion of positive liberty and its effects in Communist Russia. He later explained,

I can't deny that Marxist definitions of liberty, particularly in the Soviet Union and generally behind the Iron Curtain, did influence me somewhat in my opposition towards what is called positive liberty. If I wrote that essay today I would not have been so firm about saying that negative liberty is more civilized, more important than positive liberty. I thought that I was kind, but most reviewers thought my lecture was simply a defense of negative liberty and, to some extent, an attack on positive liberty. That I never intended. If it is how it is read, it's a misunderstanding. I obviously didn't make myself clear enough. My fault.<sup>11</sup>

Berlin's intentions notwithstanding, the essay puts on display his cold war preoccupations.

It is also true that from Berlin's perspective and historical location, positive liberty seemed to him more frequently and severely corrupted in the service of dominating others, and therefore more worthy of his sustained attention. In an interview with Ramin

Jahanbegloo, Berlin explains,

I distinguish two concepts of liberty because I think they are both elements in Western thought, and think they are different from each other. They are answers to different questions and people confuse them. The perversion of each has led to bad consequences, but one of them has, it seems to me, historically been more cruelly perverted than the other. I think that positive liberty has been distorted more disastrously than negative liberty, but I do not deny that negative liberty has been perverted into a species of "laissez-faire" which has led to terrible injustices and sufferings.<sup>12</sup>

One could wonder whether if written today, Berlin would maintain this view. In the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic inequality has increased to staggering proportions. Its attendant sufferings have likewise increased. The global trend toward increasing economic inequality and the desperation and injustice caused by it seem no less a corruption of freedom and justice than those suffered under regimes touting positive

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygułska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006), 120.

<sup>12</sup> Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 147.

conceptions of liberty.<sup>13</sup> Had Berlin written in our contemporary period, it seems likely that he would have felt compelled to focus more equitably on the dangers of corrupted forms of each conception of liberty.

Finally, Berlin's exchange with Charles Taylor contributes to the tendency among some scholars to read him as an advocate of the negative conception of liberty and an opponent of positive conceptions of liberty. In his essay, "What's Wrong with Negative Freedom," Taylor argues that a negative conception of liberty is insufficiently capable of dealing with the complexity of human desires, such that we may have some desires we would either not fully endorse, or for which we suffer from significant internal obstacles to achieving.<sup>14</sup> Negative liberty, on Taylor's view, is simply too blunt an instrument to be of much use when attempting to understand the condition of human freedom. The specifics of Taylor's argument are not relevant for my concern in this paper. However, the way in which Berlin's view is constructed in Taylor's piece (and subsequently reconstructed in commentaries on their exchange) deserves attention.

Taylor begins his essay by discussing the propensity of philosophers debating the merits of positive and negative liberty to debate from the extreme positions associated with each view. He correctly points out that Berlin identifies Hobbes and Bentham as proponents of the extreme negative view of liberty, "which sees freedom simply as the absence of external physical or legal obstacles. This view," he explains "will have no truck with other less

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<sup>13</sup> See Ricardo Fuentes-Nieva and Nick Galasso, *Working for the Few: Political Capture and Economic Inequality*, (Oxford, UK: Oxfam International, 2014) for recent data on growing economic inequality worldwide and its connection to political institutions.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," in *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honor of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175-193.



immediately obvious obstacles to freedom.”<sup>15</sup> However, Taylor misinterprets Berlin’s reference to Hobbes and Bentham as an endorsement of their position. Taylor asserts that Berlin “seems to quote Bentham approvingly and Hobbes as well.”<sup>16</sup> From this point on, in Taylor’s essay, it is taken for granted that Berlin himself endorses the extreme view of negative liberty propounded by Hobbes and Bentham. By strongly associating Berlin’s view of freedom with the Hobbesian view, the impression of Berlin one gets from Taylor’s essay is of a Berlin who subscribes to a Maginot Line view of freedom.<sup>17</sup>

The mischaracterization of Berlin that occurs in Taylor’s essay is compounded by later publications, which use Berlin and Taylor as representations of negative and positive libertarians, respectively. One example of such an essay is Chandran Kukathas’ “Defending Negative Liberty.”<sup>18</sup> In the article, Kukathas begins his defense of negative liberty by referencing Berlin’s essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Berlin is credited with making the distinction between positive and negative conceptions of liberty.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, Kukathas defends negative liberty as described by Berlin from two of Berlin’s critics, Taylor and MacCallum, who endorse positive and hybrid conceptions of liberty in their critiques,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 187. Berlin has explained that he is no Benthamite or Hobbesian. Instead, his conception of liberty is more influenced by Constant. See Berlin and Polanowska-Syngulska, *Unfinished Dialogues*, 131-132.

<sup>18</sup> Chandran Kukathas, “Defending Negative Liberty: The Importance of There Being No Impediments to Action,” *Policy* 10, no. 2 (1994): 22-26.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22. Berlin is described as making the argument for two concepts of liberty. Later, the distinction is described as “Berlin’s distinction” (22). Berlin, however, does not view himself as the progenitor of the distinction. There is evidence of the distinction in use at least as far back as Constant, whom Berlin acknowledges as deeply influential for his work. For a discussion of the influence of Constant on Berlin, see Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 42.

respectively.<sup>20</sup> By positioning Berlin in conflict with Taylor (a positive libertarian) and MacCallum (who argues for a triadic concept of liberty that includes elements of negative and positive liberty), Berlin is left to stand in, by default, as the representative of negative libertarians.

Much has been written about Taylor's critique of what he takes to be Berlin's position. Indeed, in at least three book-length treatments of his political thought, Berlin's own position on liberty is discussed in opposition to Taylor's positive conception.<sup>21</sup> In my view, the frequent rehearsal of the disagreement between Berlin and Taylor results in an over-emphasis of Berlin's endorsement of negative liberty and putative rejection of all possible concepts of positive liberty. To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that comparisons with Taylor are never useful, only that the oft-repeated disagreement with Taylor (who argues for a conception of liberty that follows from a monist, teleological view of human nature), without consideration of positive conceptions of liberty that could satisfy Berlin's commitment to pluralism and concern for self-creation, contributes to a common misreading of Berlin that over-emphasizes his endorsement of negative liberty.

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<sup>20</sup> See Gerald MacCallum, "Negative and Positive Freedom," *Philosophical Review* 76, no. 3 (1967): 312-334.

<sup>21</sup> See George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2004); Claude J. Galipeau, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). At various points in their books, each of these authors acknowledges the fact that Berlin is fundamentally opposed to what I would characterize as monist, teleological positive conceptions of freedom, but remains potentially open to other conceptions of positive liberty, yet no author offers an account of any theory of positive liberty that might satisfy Berlin's pluralist commitments and concerns about self-creation as crucially important for living a fully human life. However, those writing on Berlin's work can hardly be faulted for focusing exclusively on his opposition to monist, teleological conceptions of positive liberty. Berlin wrote extensively in response to philosophers who advanced theories of freedom that proceeded from a monist cosmology and a teleological view of human nature. See Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Additionally, focusing attention on the relative merits of positive and negative liberty that arise out of the debate between Berlin and Taylor has the effect of obscuring the primary source of their disagreement: conflicting views about human nature. Berlin has commented on the primary source of their disagreements in an introduction to an edited collection of essays in honor of Charles Taylor. Berlin explains,

The chief difference between my outlook and that of Charles Taylor is that he is basically a teleologist—both as a Christian and as a Hegelian. He truly believes...that human beings, and perhaps the entire universe, have a basic purpose...Consequently, everything that he has written is concerned with what people have believed, striven after, developed into, lived in the light of, and finally, the ultimate goals towards which human beings as such are by their very natures determined to move...He believes, unless I am much mistaken, that [human] liberation can be obtained only by the creation of a rational society in which human beings understand the world, both animate and inanimate, themselves, and the causal factors of the material world with which natural scientists deal. In this enlightened state, and in it alone, they will be free to pursue the ends for which they were created, both individually and, above all, socially. The vision is of a human society acting in a harmonious and interactive collective fashion, in which citizens bound together by the common use of untrammelled reason, free communication, and mutual understanding, can alone live freely and progress...I wish I could believe this but I do not.<sup>22</sup>

Instead, Berlin believes (as will be discussed at length below) human life does not have one, true purpose. There is no *one* way of living a good human life, but rather many conceptions of the good life, many values to which humans may commit themselves and live in the light of. Humans are free, for Berlin, to the extent that they may choose their conception of the good and live their lives in the pursuit of it. On his view, the fact of multiple human goods rules out any notion of freedom that posits freedom as the condition in which a person is capable of pursuing the one true purpose of a human life. Thus, Berlin and Taylor do disagree about conditions of freedom and unfreedom, however, they do so *because* they disagree about what it is to be human and to live a fully human life.

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<sup>22</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-3.

While comparing Taylor and Berlin is not particularly useful when it comes to understanding Berlin's conception of freedom, comparison does call attention to three characteristics of Berlin's worldview that are centrally important. It highlights Berlin's rejection of monism and utopianism, his view that there can be no final solutions, and the significance of the value of pluralism for Berlin's conception of human life. Each of these commitments are discussed below.

### *Rejection of Monism and Utopianism*

Berlin explains monism as the view that,

in the first place...all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place, that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; in the third place, that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another.<sup>23</sup>

For Berlin, this view is propounded most forcefully in the works of Plato. On his view, Platonic monism assumes an ordered universe, in which humans and all other material bodies have a purpose built into their nature. For the monist, understanding the world is a function of understanding the true essences of each object in the world. Since the universe is ordered—a *cosmos*—harmony among objects and purposes must exist. The fact that harmony has not yet been achieved, for the monist, is the result of our ignorance of the order of the universe and the true essence of objects within it. However, through the correct use of reason, the monist believes, we can come to know the order of the universe and thereby achieve the harmony that is both the true essence of the universe and the overarching goal of all human endeavors.

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<sup>23</sup> Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 5.

Berlin rejects monist world views and the utopian political projects they authorize. According to Berlin, monist world views do not accurately reflect the nature of the universe, but rather are indicative of a human desire for certainty and assurance of absolute goodness. For Berlin, utopianism is the “conviction that once last obstacles—ignorance and irrationality, alienation and exploitation, and their other individual and social roots—have been eliminated, true human history, that is universal co-operation, will at last begin.”<sup>24</sup> On Berlin’s account, the lasting appeal of utopian thinking is a reflection of the fact that, “most men...crave a bold, universal, once-and-for-all panacea.” From this, he concludes, “[i]t may be that men cannot face too much reality, or an open future, without a guarantee of a happy ending.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, for Berlin, monism and the utopian visions associated with it, do not express some fundamental, knowable truth about the universe, but rather speak to the frailty and smallness of human beings who require absolute goodness and absolute security—even if only available to them in the realm of ideas. Idealist, utopian projects are the result of a kind of naïve certainty about good and bad, right and wrong, and the inability to deal with or distaste for the contingency, ambiguity, and uncertainty that characterizes human life.

The willful naïveté of the utopian is ultimately dangerous, to Berlin. He views idealism and the utopian projects it inspires as endangering humane relations among peoples. He explains,

if one really believes that [a utopian] solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to attain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious forever—what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken...Since I know the

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<sup>24</sup> Berlin, “Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World,” in *Proper Study of Mankind*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 578.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

only true path to the ultimate solution of the problem of society, I know which way to drive the human caravan; and since you are ignorant of what I know, you cannot be allowed to have liberty of choice even within the narrowest limits, if the goal is to be reached. You declare that a given policy will make you happier, or freer, or give you more room to breathe; but I know that you are mistaken, I know what you need, what all men need; and if there is resistance based on ignorance or malevolence, then it must be broken and hundreds of thousands may have to perish to make millions happy for all time. What choice have we, who have the knowledge, but to be willing to sacrifice them all?

Here, Berlin makes clear the danger of utopian projects when pursued by those with the power to coerce others into compliance. He turns his attention on the destructive potential of utopian projects pursued by governments and other systems of authority. On his account, utopianism rests upon a flawed conception of the universe and is likely to produce inhumane treatment of others. Utopianism, on his view, rests upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the world and undermines the quality of human relationships and the ability of people to live together in community.

### *No Final Solutions*

For Berlin there can be no final solution to the problems of human beings. He explains,

It is true that some problems can be solved, some ills cured, in both the individual and social life. We can save man from hunger or misery or injustice, we can rescue men from slavery or imprisonment, and do good...but any study of society shows that every solution creates a new situation which breeds its own new needs and problems, new demands. The children have obtained what their parents and grandparents longed for —greater freedom, greater material welfare, a juster society; but the old ills are forgotten, and the children face new problems, brought about by the very solutions of the old ones, and these, even if they can in turn be solved, generate new situations, and with them new requirements and —an so on, for ever —and unpredictably.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, there is a sense in which human projects in the world can never reach true completion.

Whereas the monist with a teleological notion of the self would hold out hope for a day when

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<sup>26</sup> Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 12.

—either through the proper use of reason, divine grace, the resolution of fundamental social struggles—humans would achieve their true purpose and live in a state of perpetual peace and harmony, Berlin rejects this possibility outright. On his accounts, the monist view is wishful thinking. Built into the fabric of human life is the potential for conflict, for unforeseen consequences. What may initially act as a solution to one problem, will eventually become a problem to be dealt with itself. The best that we can hope for, then, is to be able to meet each of those challenges under conditions of fair institutions that allow for differences to co-exist with some measure of respect for others.

### *Pluralism and Human Nature*

Most significantly, Berlin is a pluralist and as such he believes that there are multiple values that may guide human action. These values do not fit neatly together into a coherent or ordered structure. Values can and do come into conflict with one another. When this happens, there is no rank ordering of values that can determine once-and-for-all which values should be pursued at the detriment of others. Humans must make choices about the values they will pursue. And those choices will vary, depending on context, goal, and personality. Berlin explains,

What is clear is that values can clash—that is why civilizations are incompatible. They can be incompatible between cultures, or groups within the same culture, or between you and me. You believe in always telling the truth, no matter what: I do not, because I believe it can be too painful and too destructive. We can discuss each others' point of view, we can try to reach common ground, but in the end what you pursue may not be reconcilable with the ends to which I find that I have dedicated my life. Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false. Justice, rigorous justice, is for some people an absolute value, but it is not compatible with what may be no less ultimate values for them—mercy, compassion—as arises in concrete cases.

For Berlin, there are multiple values that claim legitimate authority over human decision-making. Further, value conflicts are unavoidable and ultimately unsolvable. We can make value judgements in particular circumstances, but even these are open to contestation.

Following from his commitment to pluralism, Berlin views human life as characterized by openness, both with respect to the values one may pursue and the goals that may orient one in the world. For Berlin, there is no one human nature, or one way to live a fully human life. Instead, human nature is best understood in terms of the common needs of human beings and the myriad possible values and ways of life capable of fulfilling those needs. Berlin explains,

What, then, do I mean by saying that men do have a common nature [while denying a fixed human nature]? Well, I think that common ground between human beings must exist if there is to be any meaning in the concept of human being at all. I think that it is true to say that there are certain basic needs, for example—for food, shelter, security and, if we accept Herder, for belonging to a group of one's own—which anyone qualifying for the description of human being must be held to possess. These are only the most basic properties...unless there is that, communication between human beings, even within a society, let alone understanding of what others have wished to communicate in other ages and cultures, would become impossible. I believe in the permanent possibility of change, modification, variety, without being able to state that there is some central kernel which is what is being modified or changed—but there must be enough in common between all the various individuals and groups who are going through various modifications for communication to be possible; and this can be expressed by listing, almost mechanically, various basic needs—'basic' for that reason—the various forms and varieties of which belong to different persons, cultures, societies etc.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, on this view, there are basic facts of the human condition that all humans share. These are best understood in terms of the needs that all humans must fulfill to live. However, these needs provide only the background conditions for human life. *How* humans choose to fulfill them, and what values guide their choices, will be in no small part influenced by the cultures

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<sup>27</sup> Berlin, Isaiah. "A Letter on Human Nature." *The New York Review of Books*, 23 September 2004, 26. Bracketed material in original.



and societies in which human beings find themselves. For Berlin, there are no fixed ends to human life, but rather multiple potential ways of living a fully human life embedded in a human society and culture.

Throughout his career, Berlin's appreciation for the multiple and conflicting ways in which human beings have ordered their lives together grounded his work. In some of his best known essays, he considers more or less comprehensive worldviews or cultural identities (e.g., German romanticism, the Russian personality) and seems to delight in the complexity of a world in which multiple ways of living, multiple ways of being human are available to us or have been. This appreciation for the variety and complexity of human forms of life and their constant emergence and decline is fundamental to his understanding of what human life means. His conception of freedom—with both positive and negative components—follows from his primary commitment to pluralism.

### *Berlin's Conception of Liberty: Balancing Positive and Negative*

In this section of the paper, I offer a brief explication of Berlin's concept of freedom. I hope to show that Berlin's position is not the one-dimensional endorsement of negative liberty that is often assumed, and instead is deeply resonant with particular conceptions of positive liberty: namely, those conceptions that reject monism and teleology and emphasize the significance of human choice and self-creation for living a free and fully human life.

For Berlin, negative and positive conceptions of liberty differ with respect to the way they conceptualize conditions of freedom or unfreedom. For negative liberty theorists, one is free to the extent that "man-made obstacles [to action] are absent."<sup>28</sup> Thus, negative liberty is

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<sup>28</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," in *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15.

fundamentally concerned with non-interference, or “freedom from.”<sup>29</sup> Positive liberty, Berlin explains, is “freedom to”; it is the freedom to control one’s own life, freedom to be the “master of [one’s own] fate.”<sup>30</sup> Positive freedom, therefore, is concerned with the ability of persons to choose ends for their action, as well as the ability to pursue those ends free of the control of others.

According to Berlin, negative liberty alone is insufficient for decent societies. On his view, negative liberty alone, without the limits and protections of positive liberty, allows for the abuse of the weak at the hands of the powerful. He explains,

Negative liberty is twisted when I am told that liberty must be equal for the tigers and the sheep, and that this cannot be avoided even if it enables the former to eat the latter, if coercion by the state is not used. Of course unlimited liberty for the capitalists destroys the liberty of the workers, unlimited liberty for factory owners or parents will allow children to be employed in coal mines. Certainly the weak must be protected against the strong, and [negative] liberty to that extent be curtailed.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, Berlin recognizes the way in which extreme negative liberty positions serve to advance the interests of those already who are powerful. Negative liberty is certainly an ultimate value for Berlin. Yet, it cannot, on his view be pursued exclusively or treated as always the most significant or primary value. Negative liberty must be balanced with other values—such as positive liberty, equality, justice—in order to avoid intolerable exploitation of the weak by the strong.

Decent societies must, then, make trade-offs between positive and negative liberty. They must seek to maximize both negative and positive liberty without allowing either to dominate, thereby destroying the conditions necessary for the other. For Berlin, “there must

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 41.

be a balance between the two, about which no clear principles can be enunciated.”<sup>32</sup> On his view, there does not exist some discoverable correct proportion of each that, in all times and all places, will produce an acceptable equilibrium between the two positions. Instead, societies must be vigilant for potential abuses of each kind and adjust and readjust their unstable equilibrium over time and in response to new circumstances. There is no one single answer to the question of how much of each liberty must exist in a society that demonstrates an acceptable level of respect for persons, but instead a range, within which the points of equilibrium will vary with respect to culture and circumstance.

Liberal institutions are necessary for sustaining the social conditions that required for maintaining the equilibrium between positive and negative liberty. Indeed, Berlin notes that legal institutions that exclusively focus on the protection of negative liberty “are compatible with extremes of exploitation, brutality, and injustice.”<sup>33</sup> As a result, the “case for intervention by the State or other effective agencies, to secure the conditions for both positive, and at least a minimum degree of negative, liberty for individuals is overwhelmingly strong.”<sup>34</sup> State intervention to protect against extreme forms of negative political liberty and economic *laissez faire* is, on Berlin’s view, necessary because of the corrosive, abusive results of non-intervention. On his account, unrestrained negative liberty is harmful to society because it has the effect of concentrating economic and political power in the hands of those who are already powerful.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Introduction,” in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Liberal institutions, then, have an important role to play in establishing the background conditions that contribute to human freedom. Berlin explains,

The first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering. Revolutions, wars, assassinations, extreme measures may in desperate situations be required. But history teaches us that there are consequences which are seldom what is anticipated; there is no guarantee, not even, at times, a high enough probability that such acts will lead to improvement. We may take the risk of drastic action in personal life or public policy, but we must always be aware, never forget, that we may be mistaken, that certainty about the effects of such measures invariably leads to avoidable suffering of the innocent. So we must engage in what are called trade-offs—rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations...The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices—that is the first requirement for a decent society, one that we can always strive for, in the light of our limited range of knowledge, and even of our imperfect understandings of individuals and societies. A certain humility in these matters is very necessary.<sup>35</sup>

Institutions are important because they are required to provide security against the extremes of suffering that occur in their absence. However, from the necessity of institutions it does not follow that institutions (and the persons who occupy them) should be treated as infallible, nor should too much decision-making power be ceded to them in exchange for the security they provide. Political institutions must be adequately strong enough to maintain the equilibrium necessary for a decent society, and also open enough to challenge and revision in response to claims of suffering and exploitation.

For Berlin, one is free when one can make choices about the ends to pursue in life, and thereby participate in the process of self-creation. He writes, “To be free is to be able to make an unforced choice; and choice entails competing possibilities—at the very least two ‘open’, unimpeded alternatives. And this, in its turn, may well depend on external circumstances,

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<sup>35</sup> Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 14-15.

which leave only some paths unblocked."<sup>36</sup> The paths may be blocked by legal prohibitions (which lessen negative liberty) or through social arrangements that undermine personal control (which lessen positive liberty). In either circumstance, one is free to the extent that one can make a choice, and freedom is increased to the extent that external circumstances permit more options.

Choice is central to Berlin's conception of freedom because on his view it is central to what it means to be a human, to live a fully human life. He explains,

choosing is part of the evidence for being a human being...it is essential to being a human being, for me. Anyone who can't choose, who is psychologically unable to choose, is to that extent not quite human. For example, people can be hypnotised. A brainwashed person is to some extent dehumanised. He doesn't choose. Successful brainwashing means you just follow a line. Someone says, 'What about other possibilities?' 'What do you mean other possibilities? They don't occur. I can't think about them. I don't know what you mean. The only right thing to do is this, and I do it.' 'But you don't think that you might perhaps do something else? You can imagine yourself as doing something different from what you're doing.' 'No, I can't do that.' Then you are, to a certain extent less human...when [choices] have become zero, then you cease to be a human being.<sup>37</sup>

Since the capacity for choice is central to Berlin's conception of a fully human existence, one is more free to the extent that one has more options available for choosing among. For Berlin, it would be absurd to desire unlimited choices. He says, "Of course there is no such thing as being able to do everything. That's why absolute liberty is a meaningless idea."<sup>38</sup> However, the meaningful exercise of our capacity for choice is enhanced—we are made more free—when the options available to us are greater.

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<sup>36</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "From Hope and Fear Set Free," In *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 271.

<sup>37</sup> Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulas, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 218.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 122.

Choice is important for Berlin because it is through our choices that we are able to engage in the process of self-creation. The plurality of ends towards which lives can be directed creates the condition in which choice is essential for living a meaningful life. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” he writes

The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices, between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. Indeed, it is because this is their situation that men place such an immense value upon the freedom to choose... In the end, men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are, at any rate over large stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity; part of what makes them human.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, when humans choose the ends to which they direct their lives, the values they proceed to live in light of, they engage in a process of self-creation that Berlin views as fundamental to living a fully human life. Freedom, then, is necessary for the cultivation of individuality. Both positive and negative liberty have a role to play in creating the conditions necessary for engaging in self-creation.<sup>40</sup> Freedom, for Berlin, is the “possibility of the richest imaginable life.”<sup>41</sup>

Berlin’s understanding is not completely free of concerns with control. Freedom is not simply the absence of obstacles, there must exist at least some sense in which a person can control their own actions. He illustrates this in a discussion of “bodies falling freely in space.” If a person were to be falling through space, without obstacles obstructing her, then she would not, according to Berlin be free. He explains, “a body falling freely in that sense, is not free. It

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<sup>39</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 239-242.

<sup>40</sup> See *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>41</sup> Berlin and Polanowska-Syngulska, *Unfinished Dialogues*, 122.

is not free to not fall. It can't stop if it wants to."<sup>42</sup> Clearly, then, freedom for Berlin is not utterly divorced from ability. We must be capable of, to some limited degree, controlling our actions in order to be said to be free.

In terms of negative liberty, Berlin believes that on its own it is insufficient. On his accounts, unrestrained negative liberty—especially in the form of economic *laissez faire*—allows for the abuse of the poor and weak by the wealthy and powerful. But Berlin is no negative liberty theorist. He does not endorse negative liberty in an unproblematic or uncomplicated way. Instead, Berlin adopts a more cautious and dynamic position with regard to human freedom. His position is cautious, in that he recognizes the dangers associated with both positive and negative liberty in their extreme forms and seeks to avoid them. His position is dynamic in that he does not argue for a particular, settled ratio of positive to negative freedom, but instead recognizes the ongoing contestations and negotiations that maintaining human freedom requires. This more cautious and dynamic reading of Berlin is foreclosed by over-determined comparisons of him to monist-teleological positive liberty theorists like Charles Taylor.

Reading Berlin in this way is useful because it highlights Berlin's compassion and concern for others. All too often, Berlin is left to stand in as the representative of the negative liberty position. As a result, Berlin may be viewed as sympathetic to or an apologist for the neoliberal economic order that has created significant human suffering. Currently, economic inequality—the result of neoliberal ideology and policies—severely constrains the ability of the vast majority of humans to fully develop their own potentialities, to engage in acts of self-creation, and to contribute their unique gifts to the world. The negative conception of liberty

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<sup>42</sup> Berlin and Polanska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogues*, 138.

predominates. As a result, the sheep are at the mercy of the wolves. Reconsidering Berlin repositions Berlin within the liberal tradition. Berlin is no advocate of unconstrained negative liberty, complicit in the neoliberal project. Instead, the Berlin who emerges from such a reading is squarely on the side of the sheep and against the wolves. This reading of Berlin leads to a view of Berlin that is more compassionate, more concerned for others, and less willing to sacrifice human lives and suffering in the pursuit of an absolute value. Ultimately, this seems to me a fairer, more generous and accurate reading of Berlin.



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