

Negative Freedom & Positive Freedom: A Fork in the Road

Freedom, as a construct of human creation, is not as simple as it may seem. A plurality of values exists in our society which leads us to have vastly different perceptions of what it means to be free. Comprising the overarching argument of what genuine freedom requires, are the concepts of what Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) calls ‘positive freedom’ and ‘negative freedom.’ Negative freedom entails freedom from coercion and at its extreme end is a society of libertarian anarchy. Berlin is a proponent of negative freedom. Positive freedom, on the other hand, represents being your own master, and at its extreme end is totalitarianism. Positive freedom’s proponent is Charles Taylor (1931-), and he will offer a critique of negative freedom. Though both Berlin and Taylor understand that individuals desire to be free, the ultimate reality of the situation is that freedom, to an extent, is best operationalized as a positive establishment.

A core aspect of Taylor’s argument can be found in the positive ‘exercise of concept of freedom’ and the negative ‘opportunity concept of freedom.’ In the former, “one is free only to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one’s life” (Taylor 1979/2008: 373). Taylor sees the exercising of freedom as exercising control over your life through self-determination. The opportunity concept, alternatively, is “where being free is a matter of what we can do, of what is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise these options” (Taylor: 373). In other words, freedom is having opportunity, whether or not the individual chooses to exercise that freedom. The uniqueness of the opportunity concept is that it can include the exercise option as well. Because Taylor sees this as the case, it logically follows that negative freedom is limited by *both* external (physical) and internal (psychological) barriers.

For Taylor, The internal paradigm is critical, "...for the capacities relevant to freedom must involve some self-awareness [or] self-control, otherwise their exercise could not amount to freedom in the sense of self-direction; and this being so, we can fail to be free because these internal conditions are not realized" (Taylor: 374). When internal barriers are ignored, in a sense, a crucial aspect of the individual is ignored. Because humans are purposive beings (Taylor: 376), we have internal desires that distinctly influence how we exercise freedom in order to reach our own goals. These desires are fourfold and can be divided into two groups. The first group comprises first order desires and second order desires. First order desires entail our desires for things in the physical world, such as a new car. Second order desires are classified as, somewhat confusingly, desires about desires. For example, having the desire to study but wishing that you studied more.

The second group comprises brute desires and import-attributing desires. Brute desires are things that simply happen, such as the brute force of pain. For Taylor, we should be careful when identifying with brute desires. Import attributing desires are feelings we can sometimes experience mistakenly, and they become detrimental to our well being if we attribute importance to them. The internal barriers to freedom, more so than the external, play a crucial role for Taylor in his critique of negative freedom. It is our individual values and aspirations (justified with reasons) that are the deciding factor in reaching self realization. The justification in reason is necessary to combat our brute and import-attributed desires because sometimes we desire things that are bad for us.

Isaiah Berlin ignores the internal barriers that humans face as an obstacle to freedom, and focuses intently on the external barriers, because "Coercion implies the deliberate interference of

other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act” (Berlin 1958/2008: 346). The focus on the external factors is derived from Berlin’s deep concern of the state declaring a coercive act as something that is for the good of the populace without the consent of said populace. “It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good, which I am too blind to see,” Berlin says. “It is another to say that if it is my good, then I am not being coerced, for I have willed it...” (Berlin: 351). This is why Berlin takes issue with the notion of positive freedom. With enough manipulation of what it means to be free, then freedom can be formed into whatever the manipulator wishes. Above all else and when in doubt, for this principle reason, Berlin urges us to fall back on negative freedom.

But this logic’s flaw is revealed in what Taylor calls the Maginot Line strategy, which is, “...to put one’s faith in a simple and rigid strategy for defense that is, however, a failure” (Taylor: 374, editor’s note). Taylor lays out a two step process in order to transition from negative freedom to positive freedom. The first step “discriminates motivations and equates freedom with doing what we really want, or obeying our real will, or truly directing our lives” (Taylor, 375). The second step shows the failure of the Maginot Line strategy. It shows us “that we cannot do what we really want, or follow our real will, outside of a society of a certain canonical form...we can only be free in such a society, and that being free *is* governing ourselves collectively according to this canonical form” (Taylor, 375). By stopping at the first step and completely ignoring the second, Berlin evades a crucial aspect of humanity, as stated earlier, that what we want may not be the best for us. Berlin’s concept of negative freedom as all encompassing does not allow for any second guessing on the part of the individual. There is a danger in this. By stopping at the first step, we allow for a possible descent into what Berlin classifies as our lower

nature, that being, “the pursuit of immediate pleasures...swept by every gust of desire and passion...” (Berlin, 351). Therefore, a canonical form of government is necessary to regulate the social whole keeping in line with values that are backed by rational reasons.

Dealing with the social whole means dealing with a group identity. Berlin is skeptical of group identity, as it is a product of positive freedom. Berlin views “the ends of men as many, and [because of this] the possibility of conflict - and of tragedy - can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social” (Berlin, 369). He believes that a certain danger exists in attempting to overcome fundamental disagreements in society. However, it could be asserted that the United States, as a successful experiment in republicanism, disproves Berlin’s statement.

There are four key values in a liberal democracy: popular consent, individualism, equality, and liberty. No state can achieve all four values, so tradeoffs must be made. Such tradeoffs should be impossible in Berlin’s rejection of the ‘ancient faith’ which “rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible...” (Berlin, 368). The case could be made that the United States has traded individualism and popular consent for liberty and equality (of opportunity). In Berlin’s view, a pluralism of values cannot be reconciled, especially in the diverse immigrant nation of the United States, but such compromise and reconciliation does in fact occur. Taylor’s traffic light example exemplifies this, which states that “...a small loss of liberty was worth fewer traffic accidents...” (Taylor, 376). The traffic light example of a trade off proves that a society, in which the ends of men are many, there can be a harmony of interests.

Taylor and Berlin provide two sides of a skewed spectrum. They do not represent their respective sides equally. Those who defend negative freedom tend to defend the extreme end of

it, whereas defenders of positive freedom defend a more centrist position. Berlin would love to see a utopia of libertarian anarchy instead of the authoritarian ideal that advocates of positive freedom would strive for. But therein lies the issue. Taylor is not arguing for the extreme end of his preferred mode of freedom, he is arguing for self-determinism complemented by a guiding structure that would steer us away from our malicious desires. Taylor does not argue that the individual should be coerced for their own good, because the individual still has independence from the state, and is not absorbed into the organs of some fascist regime.

For freedom to be genuine, legitimate, and robust there must be some order to it; it must have structure. Berlin's Kantian argument for negative freedom, which says that "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made" (Berlin, quoting Kant: 370) can be used against him. To have the individual at the helm of governance (if you could even call it that) would be to bare witness to the collapse of society into some Hobbesian nightmare scenario in which there may be opportunity, but those opportunities are quickly swallowed up by the individuals with the greatest capability. The warped human timber only becomes more distorted in a realm of negative freedom. Yes, humanity is crooked, but we can at least make an attempt at straightening it with positive freedom.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1958/2008. *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Excerpt in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought, Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century and Beyond*, edited by Andrew Bailey, Samantha Brennan, Will Kymlicka, Jacob Levy, Alex Sager, Clark Wolfe, 162-169. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1979/2008. *What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?*. Excerpt in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought, Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century and Beyond*, edited by Andrew Bailey, Samantha Brennan, Will Kymlicka, Jacob Levy, Alex Sager, Clark Wolfe, 162-169. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.