Chapter 3

Reassessing Isaiah Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty: Liberty and the Shadow of Totalitarianism

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Abstract

Isaiah Berlin's classic lecture, "Two Concepts of Liberty," remains one of the fundamental reference points in modern political philosophy discussions on freedom. In this work, Berlin divides freedom into two analytical categories: Negative freedom means that the individual has a space protected from arbitrary interference by others; positive freedom is based on the idea that the individual can establish rational self-governance over their own life, in other words, self-realization. While negative freedom guarantees individual plurality and political limitation, positive freedom harbors a dangerous potential in light of historical experiences. The concept of positive freedom divides the individual into a "real" and an "illusory" self. This division can enable political powers to legitimize coercive and oppressive practices under the pretext of knowing the individual's rational interests. However, this section argues that Berlin's strong criticism of positive freedom needs to be reevaluated. Charles Taylor argues that negative liberty also overlooks internal fears and internalized forms of domination that limit individual freedom by focusing solely on external constraints. Gerald MacCallum rejects the distinction between negative and positive liberty, arguing that liberty should be understood as a single relational structure consisting of a subject, an obstacle, and a goal. The chapter also examines John Christman's "content-neutral" positive liberty approach, which focuses on whether desires arise autonomously and without coercion rather than on their rational content. Consequently, it is argued that the authoritarian danger Berlin pointed to stems not from the idea of positive freedom itself, but from the social and political structures that interpret it dogmatically and totalitarian. In this context, positive freedom can still be considered a legitimate and constructive normative ideal for contemporary societies centered on individual development.

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1. Introduction

Freedom is universally praised and desired by humans, individually or collectively, to attain a good living. As Charles Taylor said, liberty has a significant implication for a human being because our lives have a purpose (Taylor, 2006). Nevertheless, liberty has always been a challenging and complex concept to discuss in the realm of political philosophy or theory. One of these debates was conducted by Isaiah Berlin, who made significant contributions to the concept of freedom. Sir Isaiah Berlin, in his inaugural lecture delivered in 1958, "Two Concepts of Liberty," focuses on the significant distinction between the "negative" sense and "positive" sense of liberty.

Berlin aims to highlight the negative freedom as "the absence of coercion or interference" and the positive freedom as "self-mastery or self-realization" in terms of "freedom from what and freedom to what" respectively. This dichotomy theory is historically associated with the ideas of earlier political philosophers such as Mill, Locke, Rousseau, Hobbes, Burke, etc. What he did is a brilliant, necessary, and important theoretical work in politics, according to many scholars. Berlin's analysis was a philosophical warning against the destruction of human ideals.

Berlin mostly gives his significant concern and attention to the positive freedom as a danger of authoritarianism or totalitarian menace, and his sympathies of negative freedom as a vital and at least minimum of freedom, such as freedom of speech. However, in this review essay, I discuss that there is a need for a reassessment which should evaluate the argument that the negative and the positive freedom in citing from Berlin's view may have some paradoxes that might lead to other alternative perspectives of freedom to be developed, although his theoretical framework of freedom is a decent work.

In this manner, this essay consists of four parts. The first part introduces Berlin's distinction between positive and negative notions of liberty to understand his discussion of the concept of liberty. The second part argues why Berlin's definition of positive freedom leads to a totalitarian argument by highlighting his tyrannical argument to analyze its importance of establishing totalitarian rule. The next part presents the evidence that positive liberty does not inevitably lead to an authoritarian or oppressive regime. Finally, the last part provides a general summary of the essay.

2. Negative and Positive Notions of Liberty

Berlin begins with the negative notion of freedom, which answers to the question "What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" (Berlin, 2006, p. 34). Negative freedom is the absence of something such as coercion or obstacles (or outside interference) from others. Moreover, the negative freedom produces a zone of non-interference that lets me speak the words: "I am no one's slave."

Therefore, being coerced or enslaved means that I am unfree. This coercion is constructed by other men beyond a certain minimum to prevent my activity (Berlin, 2006, p. 35). In this sense, Berlin derived the definition of negative freedom from a concept defined by some classical theorists, from John Locke (originally from Hobbes) to J.S. Mill. According to them, there is a necessity for some limits to freedom to prevent others' freedom. A man cannot be totally free and should give up some to preserve the others. However, they believe that individual freedom is not something to be left for centralized control, and a minimum area of personal freedom, like a liberty of religion, opinion, or property, must be preserved. Berlin states that even such this kind of small interference "to invade that preserve would be despotism" (Berlin, 2006, p. 38).

If somebody restricts negative freedom, this means that he/she restricts the options available to a person. Therefore, Berlin states that externalities can be interferences in other people's spaces and that negative liberty must be seen as private (Collignon, 2018). In this sense, we can claim that negative liberty is usually an "opportunity-concept" which refers to what is open to one to do (Elford, 2012; Taylor, 2006). Berlin also concludes that freedom is not connected with democracy or self-government, and accordingly, "there is no necessary connection between individual liberty and democratic rule" (Berlin, 2006, p. 42).

In this approach, the key concept is interference. According to the negative liberty perspective, freedom is considered in terms of the presence or absence of constraints that limit an individual's sphere of action. These constraints must be externally imposed and created by human intervention. For example, limitations arising from natural conditions do not indicate a lack of political freedom. However, later thinkers such as Chandran Kukathas have argued that internal constraints can also be considered more comprehensively within the understanding of negative freedom, as long as they play a restrictive role in practice (Kukathas, 1994).

According to Thomas Hobbes, a free individual is someone who, within the limits of their physical and mental capacity, is not hindered in carrying out the actions they wish to perform (see Hobbes, 1998, part 1). This definition separates the concept of freedom from moral or normative evaluations, allowing for an analytical distinction between the freedom of action and the correctness of action, thereby developing an instrumental framework (Kukathas, 1994). In this context, the individual can be considered free even in terms of pursuing objectionable goals, exhibiting irrational behavior, or engaging in malicious actions. The understanding of negative freedom does not insist that the agent be rational, virtuous, or autonomous. It only considers the agent to be free from external interference. Indeed, as Kukathas states, the importance of negative freedom stems from the fact that actions freely performed belong to the agent, regardless of their content or level of rationality (Kukathas, 1994, p. 25). The most important feature of the concept of negative freedom is therefore the principle of pluralism on which it is based. This perspective acknowledges that individuals have diverse goals, and that these goals are often conflicting or incompatible, or even incomparable.

On the other hand, Berlin is against positive liberty. He deals with a critical question to call the positive freedom: "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" (Berlin, 2006, p. 34). The positive freedom is the presence of something (self-mastery or self-realization). It is the freedom to be his/her own master. A man is responsible for his/her own choices. The metaphor of self-mastery or self-realization is used to refer to the positive freedom that holds a higher rational self and a lower irrational self. To be self-master, the lower self should be controlled by the higher self here. Berlin links this idea to some philosophers such as Hegel, Kant, and Rousseau. If somebody is forced to be free, then this will be a positive freedom. However, due to this kind of force, the positive freedom could lead to "a specious disguise for brutal tyranny" (Berlin, 2006, p. 43), which has historically developed from the past. This is why positive freedom may lead to a danger of authoritarian rule, according to Berlin's idea. In these perspectives, any positive definition of liberty is also an "exercise-concept" which refers to what one wants to do (Elford, 2012; Taylor, 2006).

Although Berlin distinction seems so reasonable, it can also be said that this distinction is actually not a distinction at all because, according to MacCallum (1967), both negative and positive liberty, in fact, always involve the format which is "x is free from y to do z" that " x ranges over agents, y ranges over such 'preventing conditions' as constraints, restrictions,

interferences, and barriers, and z ranges over actions or conditions of character or circumstance" (MacCallum, 1967, p. 314). Thus, positive freedom should not be separated from negative freedom in terms of its applicability to society because both liberties must coexist and should not be substituted for each other (Collignon, 2018, p. 39). In fact, totalitarianism can work for both.

According to Berlin, there are two main points for positive liberty. Also, there is a distinction between an external (a coercer) and an internal (desire or passion) obstacle here. On the one hand, there is a 'real' or 'higher' self with me at its best (reason); on the other hand, there is a 'lower' self with passion and pleasures. The real self presents something rather than an individual, which is a social 'whole' that makes an individual an element of a state, a race, a church, etc. This is the 'true' self as a collective or 'organic' identity. This means that the real self is identified with this particular social structure. With this exterior reality, one can still justify coercion because Berlin claims that your behavior can be on behalf of someone else's real self. He explains that coercing people for their own sake may be seen in a certain situation, but this character is still coercive.

At this point, the fundamental distinction between conceptions of freedom becomes more apparent. If freedom is defined as the individual's ability to control themselves, and this self-control is linked to the condition of rationality, then it follows that only individuals capable of rational behavior are truly free. Taking this assumption one step further, the existence of a single, universal Reason is accepted; consequently, it is thought that all rational goals must necessarily be compatible with each other. This chain of thought, starting from the idea of self-control and reaching the unity of rational purposes, forms the philosophical basis of what Berlin calls the "Temple of Sarastro," a utopian vision of a social order in which conflicts are resolved by wise and rational rulers (Berlin, 2006).

Within this framework, it becomes clear why the distinction between John Stuart Mill, who is generally positioned as "liberal," and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is considered "authoritarian," is not so clear-cut. Both thinkers focus on the position and status of the autonomous subject; therefore, the difference between them is not as sharp as it seems at first glance. This is the main reason why Berlin finds it difficult to draw a clear line between these two approaches. For negative liberty to be meaningful, the individual must be assumed to be an autonomous actor capable of making choices.

In this sense, the question arises: Can we say that there is adequate evidence to clearly understand this distinction between negative and positive

freedom from Berlin's viewpoint? I say no. Because many scholars have a distinct perspective on both freedoms to defend them, and usually they pose some arguable paradoxes from Berlin's point. Although they agree with what Berlin did as a perfect work for a dichotomy theory of liberty, they also believe it should be extended and developed.

Whereas Berlin illustrates to us the paradox of positive freedom, other scholars like Charles Taylor attempt to show the opposite way that negative freedom is paradoxical. Taylor lays down a critical argument that can be a paradox for Berlin's stance on negative freedom (Taylor, 2006). Taylor points out internal factors such as fear of losing comfort or public speaking. He believes that there are internal conflicts in this concept. Thus, he points out that the negative notion of freedom is incomplete without realizing or understanding these internal factors, which include rational fears. With this insight, we can state that there is also a problem in negative liberty, as Taylor stated. He argues that the conditions, which Berlin states, to limit freedom produce a paradox because they are not only external but also internal.

Besides what Berlin says about the positive freedom and the negative freedom, some scholars develop an alternative way for both. For example, John Christman provides positive freedom as a content-neutral form. He claims that freedom does not mean the content of any desires, as Berlin says; however, it is their mode of formation (Christman, 1991). Another scholar, Phillip Pettit, attempts to go beyond the negative freedom to provide the ideal of republican freedom. According to him, freedom depends on the existence of political institutions that enable individuals to maintain their independence even under arbitrary rule. With this form of state, even if a person is a slave, she/he may still enjoy freedom without interference or domination (Pettit, 2006).

Although Berlin's theoretical work on liberty is brilliant, I believe that both positive and negative freedom should be developed or extended in terms of their values to individuals or societies. However, this does not mean, of course, that Berlin's distinction has no value, but somehow paradoxes, and they can lead us to address an active society and the preferences of one or both of freedom in terms of their application to that active society. We can even see that the choosing side of freedom is not easy due to the question of what a good life should be.

3. Positive Liberty and Its Link to Totalitarian Argument

In this part, this essay argues why Berlin's definition of positive freedom leads to a totalitarian argument by highlighting his tyrannical argument to analyze its importance in establishing totalitarian rule.

We can claim here that two types of positive liberty can be dangerous to one's freedom. The first type is idealism that a man can be divided into two personalities, which are "the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel" (Berlin, 2006, p. 47). One way of achieving self-mastery is possible through self-abnegation. If you reduce your unrealistic desires and wants, you can achieve self-mastery. However, our ability to reduce or clear all internal obstacles is not enough to achieve self-mastery. This application thus requires us to be controlled or disciplined by someone else until we become rational.

Another way to achieve positive freedom is the freedom with a critical reason to understand the necessities, which someone can claim that their idea of something is more rational. He can then use this claim "to coerce those who have chosen the wrong values by their own free will, and to do so in the name of value, he has instead chosen, and which are, on his conviction, more rational than theirs" (Gustavsson, 2014, p. 277). According to Berlin, rationalists can easily build a totalitarian regime for this reason. Therefore, knowledge (or virtue) makes you free while ignorance or illusion makes you unfree. When you learn the truth, then you are free. Berlin objects to this claim by implying that rulers (especially dictators) treat people as a raw material to justify their actions because he points out that this freedom is still despotism and wrong. Therefore, these approaches may be good, but they do not mean freedom. Positive liberty, in these senses, has the tendency of the implication of monism, and this leads to totalitarianism, which is the reason why Berlin favors negative liberty for human development.

Moreover, positive liberty has a strong relation to the tyranny argument due to its presence of self-mastery. Christman (1991), for this argument, states that external forces can affect a person's motivation and, in order to attain self-mastery, "the free person must be guided by values that are her own" (Christman, 1991, p. 345). This motivation is important to determine whether someone is guided by their own values. For this, the external force should not be an act of "reflection-inhibiting factors," and the motivation should be guided by a "clear-headed manner" (Christman, 1991) to prevent someone from practicing self-mastery. With this implication, we can assume that an individual must make their decision between the options they have.

These options can be called competing motives because they provide a lot of things to decide. Furthermore, this step includes the assertion that an agent or collective can interfere or force the person to follow the right direction (motive). This step is also believed to increase the person's freedom, but this depends on the external agent or collective being better at realizing that motive than everybody else.

Lastly, it can be seen that Berlin's positive liberty has a totalitarian menace when taking the historical observations of some events into account. Berlin traces back to history to define its positive liberty. In Berlin's writing, it is obvious that he assumes that the existence of those who are totalitarian leaders or belong to a ruling class and rule coercively coerces their society or very poor people into totalitarianism (i.e., Soviet communism and Stalin's perversion of Marxism).

Berlin argues that the historical background of positive liberty describes totalitarianism. However, he does not link positive liberty to modern liberty, which I find that we must naturally and logically distinguish between the past and modern liberty. With this inquiry, the distinction between individualism and political holism will be clearer in describing positive liberty in modern times.

There is no direct relationship between positive liberty and idealism (that a man can be divided into two personalities). This means that the splitting self is about that man's application not to be used as a tool of positive liberty because positive liberty provides a goal of being of own master and self-governing. Even though that man accepts the splitting self, this does not mean he accepts rationalism or rational understanding. A man can split his higher self (irrational) and lower self (rational) but does not have to sacrifice his lower self for liberty. Again, his goal is governing himself, and this happens because there are many different desires, values, or wants other than rationalism. That man, therefore, does not have to choose rationality to achieve self-mastery. For this reason, all conceptions of positive liberty are about achieving self-mastery rather than that mentioned above. Also, it should be particularly emphasized that the fundamental danger inherent in positive freedom arises not so much from the concept itself as from the totalitarian dogmas embedded in the social structure that defines the individual's realistic self. Thus, Berlin's argument is incoherent in terms of this application.

Moreover, while using Christman's (1991) terminology, positive freedom is a content-neutral form. He claims that freedom does not mean the content of any desires, as Berlin says; however, it is their mode of formation. In other

words, positive liberty is not the content of an individual's motives. Rather, it is their "procedural conditions" (Christman, 1991). Christman states:

> …if the desires and values that a person develops are generated in accordance with the procedural conditions of autonomous preference formation that are constitutive of freedom, then no matter what the "content" of those desires, the actions which they stimulate will be (positively) free. There are good theoretical reasons for a content neutral conception. For any desire, no matter how evil, self-sacrificing, or slavish it might be, we can imagine cases where, given the conditions faced, an agent would have good reason to have such a desire. (Christman, 1991, p. 359)

In this perspective, that individual "has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one's life," which "the concept of freedom here is an exercise-concept" (Taylor, 2006, p. 143). Based on this terminology, the external agent or collective must know how the individual would want to live his life or himself, which is a "practical impossibility" (Christman, 1991, p. 355). In this context, positive freedom does not require external rationalization because self-regulation is an individual practice. According to Taylor (2006), any defensible understanding of positive freedom must include the ability to make at least a qualitative distinction between an individual's motivations. Additionally, Taylor states that even more sophisticated liberals like J. S. Mill have pointed out the importance of self-development or improvement, which is the application of some degree of positive freedom. For this, positive liberty should be understood in terms of individualism, not as a part of totalitarianism (see Taylor, 2006).

4. Conclusion

Positive liberty itself does not inevitably lead to authoritarian rule or "totalitarian menace." It is not a dangerous ideal in the sense that Berlin points out. Firstly, this is so because the greater danger of positive liberty is about its totalitarian beliefs and dogmas in social structure, not about positive liberty itself. Secondly, there is no direct relationship between positive liberty and idealism, and between positive liberty and rationalism. Even though there is a connection between them, this does not mean that the people who interfere still exist, as mentioned above.

Also, there is a need for a modern interpretation of positive liberty, which can be seen in many aspects of society, rather than the historical interpretation. Moreover, an external rationality in the self-mastery is not necessary for positive liberty because the self-mastery should be subject

to individualism. Therefore, positive liberty should be applied in terms of individualism too, not as a part of totalitarianism. Finally, there is a need for an alternative understanding of positive liberty constructed in terms of control that Petit refers to as the non-domination form (Pettit, 2006). In this perspective, institutions cannot practice power over individuals.

In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin explains that positive liberty leads to totalitarianism in history (which he mostly refers to the historical event). However, as this paper states, logically and simply, the existence of positive freedom does not inevitably lead to totalitarianism. There is no necessary causal relationship between these two phenomena.

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