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Liberty and Value Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Freedom'

George Crowder

[1] 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 [negative] sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. ... [2] The 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. ... [3] The freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men, may, on the face of it, seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other.... Yet the 'positive' and 'negative' notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions, not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other ... [4] [T]he 'positive' conception of freedom as self-mastery, with its suggestion of a man divided against himself, has in fact, and as a matter of history, lent itself more easily to this splitting of personality into two: the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel ... [5] 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 realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. [6] Pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind.¹

Isaiah Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1958) is one of the classics of the liberal canon. It has been said that what John Rawls did for the idea of justice in *A Theory of Justice*, Berlin did for the idea of liberty (or freedom) in 'Two

Concepts'.² Yet the precise meaning of Berlin's essay is widely disputed, along with its merits.³ Berlin's most obvious purpose is to define and contrast two conceptions of liberty, negative and positive – respectively liberty as non-interference and liberty as self-mastery. The immediate political context is the Cold War, and negative liberty is presented by Berlin as the liberty of the liberal-democratic West in conflict with the positive liberty of the communist world. On the whole, Berlin defends the negative liberty of the liberals and is critical of the positive idea.

But things are not quite as simple as that. In the last section of 'Two Concepts', a theme becomes explicit that underlies the whole argument: the plurality and incommensurability of fundamental human values, and the problems that arise when these come into conflict. Berlin is not the straightforward defender of negative liberty that he is often taken to be. Consequently, his liberalism is more complex than is often supposed. Indeed, his thought raises a question that he does not himself confront systematically: How far, given a world of plural values, can liberalism itself be defended?

Like his political thought, Berlin's personal background is more complex than some readers may expect. On the surface, he appears to be a quintessential figure of the British establishment, but he came from a middle-class Russian-Jewish background – he was born in Riga, which in 1909 was part of the Russian Empire. Berlin himself acknowledges 'three strands in my life': English, Russian and Jewish.⁴ This inner diversity provides a biographical context both for his visceral opposition to the Soviet regime – his family fled to Britain in 1921 – and for his sympathy with what he regards as the human need for cultural belonging and national recognition, themes that come together with his Jewish heritage in a rather troubled commitment to Zionism.⁵

Berlin's scholarly interests range over several fields, but his master-question is that of the intellectual origins of twentieth-century totalitarianism, especially in its communist form. Ironically, he finds those origins most immediately in the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. Berlin accepts the values of the Enlightenment – liberty, equality, toleration, rational inquiry – but worries that the scientism of the Enlightenment, its characteristic faith in the authority of scientific method, has led to a narrow understanding of reason and eventually to a dangerous utopianism. This is the pedigree of Marxism. Behind it lies a more ancient belief in moral 'monism': the idea that every ethical question has a single uniquely correct answer and that all such answers are discoverable and harmonious with one another. The possibility of a single monist formula in

ethics suggests a single correct formula for social and political organization. The prospect of such perfection necessarily justifies any sacrifice. Soviet tyranny is merely the latest, scientific form taken by this old idea.

In 'Two Concepts', Berlin links these background ideas to an account of liberty, or more precisely, to an account of the contemporary contest over the meaning of liberty in the world of the Cold War. Berlin acknowledges that when it comes to the idea of liberty there are 'more than two hundred senses of it recorded by historians of ideas' (168). He proposes to examine only two.

First, the negative conception of liberty is the idea that I am 'free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity' (passage [1] of the opening extract). Berlin conceives of the negative idea in terms of 'the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others' (169). The typical obstacle to negative liberty is therefore coercion, 'the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act' (169).

However, although Berlin believes that negative liberty is the central goal of liberalism, he also stresses that liberals should take a balanced view of its value. On the one hand, there must be 'a certain minimum area of personal freedom'; 'a frontier must be drawn between the area of private life and that of public authority' (171). What exactly the minimum should be or where precisely the frontier should be drawn is a matter of dispute, although the basic rule is that the degree of individual liberty in a society should reflect that society's understanding of the fundamental requirements of human dignity as these have been accepted over long periods of history. In this, the maximal demands for liberty of the most advanced liberal thinkers, such as Locke and Mill, Constant and Tocqueville, have perhaps been exceptional, and most human societies will settle for less (171). On the other hand, 'liberty is not the only good of men', and there may be good reasons to qualify it in the name of other values, such as equality or justice (172). Berlin is sometimes taken to treat negative liberty as overriding, in contradiction with his own notion of moral pluralism, but this is clearly not true. A liberal society will, of course, place a certain emphasis on negative liberty, but that will never be absolute.

The second of Berlin's two conceptions of liberty, the positive idea, 'derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master' (passage [2]). I have positive liberty to the extent that I have control over my life. While negative liberty is about not being impeded or interfered with, positive liberty is about possessing power or capacity. Negative liberty places limits on authority while positive liberty locates authority in the right place (212).

As Berlin observes, the positive idea may at first seem to be 'at no great logical distance' from its negative counterpart, but he proceeds to explain how the two ideas have come into conflict (passage [3]). Indeed, the positive idea has developed in a way that not only conflicts with negative liberty but distorts the meaning of freedom altogether.

The sequence of development Berlin describes is not one of logical necessity – 'not always by logically reputable steps' – but rather partly historical and partly associational or psychological. The starting point is the idea that positive self-mastery may be obstructed, not only by coercion from an external source, as with negative liberty, but also by aspects of a person's own psychology: fears, beliefs, emotions, appetites. People can experience a sense of their own self as being divided. These conflicting selves are then experienced as 'higher' and 'lower', or more and less authentic: my rational self is typically thought to be more authentically 'me' than my emotional self. The next step is the thought that others may know my genuinely rational interests better than I do. Perhaps this superior knowledge is possessed by experts or by authorities. If so, it may be that these authorities can justifiably coerce my lower self in the interests of my higher self. Finally, in doing so, they may justly say that they are not only acting for my own good but liberating me because they are placing my true or authentic self back in control of my life. In Rousseau's paradox, I am 'forced to be free'.⁶

For Berlin, this conclusion is a 'monstrous impersonation' (180). This is the pattern that lies behind the claims of the twentieth-century dictatorships to have 'liberated' their people. Positive liberty need not necessarily be twisted in this way, but the fact that this is true historically (while the same is not true of negative liberty) points to a distinctive vulnerability at its heart. This can be traced to the notion of the divided self, 'this splitting of personality into two: the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel' (passage [4]). Negative liberty is not so susceptible because its underlying conception of the self is wholly empirical: the individual's actual wishes cannot be second-guessed in the same way.

Having laid out the central problem, Berlin proceeds to elaborate different versions of positive liberty and cognate ideas, in each case bringing out latent conflicts with negative liberty and other difficulties. For example, one turn taken by the positive concept is towards liberty as 'self-abnegation', in which the authentic self is secured either by eliminating or by resisting the pull of the lower self (181). The Stoic 'retreat to the inner citadel' is an example of the former manoeuvre; Kant's rational self-control illustrates the latter. While Berlin allows

that these may be reasonable models of freedom at a personal level, he sees them as 'the very antithesis of political freedom' (186). In politics, he thinks, we should not merely adapt ourselves to obstacles, we should try to remove them.

Another subset of positive liberty identifies the authentic self with rationality, which frees us from myths and illusions: 'Knowledge liberates' (190). But in the thought of Hegel, Marx and others, this turns into the idea that we are liberated by knowledge of 'historical necessity', which can tempt us to reconcile ourselves to policies and actions that we should not accept. Moreover, the worship of reason embodied in history can become the worship of reason embodied in the state.

Much of what Berlin has said up to this point addresses the context of the Cold War, in which he associates positive conceptions of liberty with either the authoritarianism of state communism or the quietism of those who fail to oppose it. But the positive idea and its cognates are also relevant, and more attractive, in another contemporary political context, that of the decolonization and emergent nationalism of the developing world in the 1950s.

In a section entitled 'The Search for Status', Berlin considers the relation between liberty and recognition: 'The lack of freedom about which men or groups complain amounts, as often as not, to the lack of proper recognition' (201). People need a sense of individual dignity and group belonging but also a sense that, in both dimensions, their identity is acknowledged and respected by those around them. This is a real human need, Berlin agrees, but is it really liberty? His initial answer is that it is 'akin to, but not itself, freedom' (204). Yet, in the end, he finds it hard to deny an element of liberty in recognition, declaring it first to be 'very close' to liberty (205), and ultimately to be 'a hybrid form of freedom' (206).

Berlin reaches that conclusion in part because he believes that the desire for recognition contains an element of the desire for sovereignty, or collective self-rule. This is definitely a species of liberty, in the positive register. Here again, though, his emphasis is on the potential for conflict between positive and negative liberty. Nineteenth-century liberals like Mill and Constant were right to worry that the collective positive liberty of democracy could crush negative liberty unless individuals were protected by 'frontiers of freedom' that were regarded as 'sacred' (209, 210). Still, it is up to each society to find its own balance. It is understandable that newly independent nations are prepared to trade off some of the negative liberty allowed by their former colonial masters in exchange for a less liberal rule exercised by their fellow-nationals.

At this point it seems that Berlin has withdrawn considerably from what appeared to be his stern attitude to positive liberty earlier on.⁷ Although he never condemns the positive idea completely, for much of his discussion he gives the strong impression that, in the political realm at least, negative liberty is the safer and perhaps the more coherent ideal. Indeed, he sometimes hints at the thought that the negative idea is the 'normal' or fundamental form of liberty, and that the positive variations are in one way or another metaphorical extensions or departures from it (169, 204). Nevertheless, there are other passages, especially towards the end of the essay, in which Berlin is more inclined to see the two ideas as moral equals: 'The satisfaction that each of them seeks is an ultimate value which, both historically and morally, has an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind' (212).

In the final section of the essay, 'The One and the Many', Berlin deepens this theme of the ultimate equality of the two liberties by setting it in the context of his underlying idea of value pluralism.⁸ The moral monism on which authoritarianism has thrived must be rejected as not only dangerous but false: as humans 'we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others' (passage [5]). Each speaks with its own unique voice. Consequently, we must make hard choices between the two liberties, between liberty and other goods, and among basic goods in general, when they conflict.

This raises the question, how *can* we choose among conflicting values if they are incommensurable? In particular, why should we follow Berlin in emphasizing the negative liberty that he identifies with a liberal approach to politics? Other values, such as positive liberty, equality, justice and so forth, would seem to be just as fundamental. Berlin admits that there is no simple answer to this; if there were a single formula, the monists would be correct. In different parts of his work, he offers various suggestions.⁹ In 'Two Concepts', he argues that reflection on value pluralism itself provides the answer. If we must choose among conflicting values then we should value the freedom with which to make such choices – that is, the negative freedom of choice that lies at the heart of liberalism. 'Pluralism, with the measure of "negative" liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of "positive" self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind' (passage [6]).

'Two Concepts' is a relatively brief but complex work that raises many issues. For many years, discussion concentrated on the negative–positive distinction

and Berlin's critique of the positive idea. Some recent 'republican' critics have seen the negative-positive dichotomy as too confining since it distracts attention from a third conception of freedom as 'non-domination', or the absence not of actual constraints on people but of the power to constrain them.¹⁰ The core notion of liberty for the republicans is neither non-interference nor self-mastery but liberation from slavery or arbitrary power. Other commentators complain that Berlin is too hard on positive liberty as a political ideal since, as Berlin himself allows, positive liberty can take many forms, not all of them authoritarian. Indeed, different kinds of positive liberty have been promoted by significant liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, T. H. Green, Joseph Raz and Will Kymlicka.

In recent years, however, critical attention to Berlin's account of liberty has been supplemented by a new focus on the theme of value pluralism and its implications for the defence of liberalism. Berlin's conceptual link between pluralism and liberalism in 'Two Concepts' is not satisfactory because the sheer necessity of choosing does not make choosing valuable or give us a reason to expand the freedom to choose. Might pluralism and liberalism be linked in some other way? Opinion is divided. On the one hand, there are those who deny that value pluralists can be liberals, at least in the orthodox sense in which individual liberty is emphasized, as against other public goods, in universal terms.¹¹ On the other hand, there are 'liberal pluralists' who try to restate the connection between pluralism and liberalism in terms more systematic and persuasive than Berlin's.¹² Overall, the legacy of 'Two Concepts' continues to be disputed, but that is a sign of its continued vitality.