

Negative and Positive Freedom – An Introduction

Negative freedom

The concept of negative freedom centres on freedom from interference. This type of account of freedom is usually put forward in response to the following sort of 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)

Or, more simply, 'Over what area am I master?' Theories of negative freedom spell out the acceptable limits of interference in individuals' lives. You restrict my negative freedom when you restrict the number of choices I can make about my life. The extent of my negative freedom is determined by how many possible choices lie open to me, or, to use one of Berlin's metaphors, how many doors are unlocked. It is also determined by the types of choices that are available. Clearly not every sort of choice should be given equal status: some choices are of greater importance than others. For most of us having freedom of speech, even if we don't take advantage of this opportunity, is a more important freedom than the freedom to choose between ten different sorts of washing powder. It doesn't matter whether or not I actually take advantage of the opportunities open to me: I am still free to the extent that I could, if I chose, take advantage of them:

The freedom of which I speak is opportunity for action, rather than action itself. If, although I enjoy the right to walk through open doors, I prefer not to do so, but to sit still and vegetate, I am not thereby rendered less free.

Freedom is the opportunity to act, not action itself.

So, if you park your car across my drive, thereby preventing me from getting my car out, you restrict my freedom; and this is true even if I choose to stay in bed listening to my CDs all day, and would have done so even if you hadn't parked there. Or, if the state prevents me from going on strike by making my actions illegal, even if I don't have anything to strike about, and even if I don't ever intend to strike, my freedom is

still curtailed. Negative freedom is a matter of the doors open to me, not of whether I happen to choose to go through them.

However, not all restrictions on my possible choices are infringements of my negative freedom. Berlin states that only restrictions imposed by other people affect my freedom. Colloquially, we might say that because we are human we aren't free to jump ten feet in the air or free to understand what an obscure passage in a difficult book by Hegel means. But when discussing political freedom, the sort we are interested in here, these sorts of restrictions on what we can do, aren't counted as obstacles to freedom, however distressing they may be. Other people limit our freedom by what they do.

Limitations on our action brought about by the nature of the universe or the human body aren't relevant to the discussion of political freedom. Political freedom is a matter of the relations of power which hold between individuals and between individuals and the state.

The clearest cases in which freedom is restricted are when someone forces you to do something. You might be forced to join the army, for instance, if you live in a country which has compulsory military service. The law might force you to wear a crash helmet every time you ride your motorcycle. Your partner might force you to stay in rather than go out to the cinema, or to tidy up the kitchen rather than do another hour's study.

It might have seemed to follow from Berlin's account of negative freedom that poverty couldn't count as a limitation on individual freedom. True, poverty effectively locks many doors. But these doors aren't necessarily locked by other people's actions; poverty may have other, non-human, causes. It may be due to the effects of freak weather conditions leading to famine; or perhaps to sudden illness or accident. Whether or not poverty is to count as a limitation of negative freedom depends entirely on your view of the causes of the poverty in question.

Which of the following involve limitations on an individual's negative freedom in the sense outlined by Berlin above? Not all the cases are clear-cut.

1. *The state prevents you from purchasing certain kinds of pornography.*
2. *You aren't tall enough to pick quinces from the tree in your garden.*
3. *You aren't tall enough to join the police force.*
4. *You aren't rich enough to buy a private island.*
5. *You aren't permitted to own a handgun.*
6. *The law forces you to wear a seatbelt when driving.*
7. *No one has ever selected you to play football for your country.*
8. *You are forced to study philosophy against your will.*
9. *Someone has handcuffed you to a lamppost.*
10. *You can't read because you are blind. Officers of an evil totalitarian regime blinded you to prevent you reading and writing subversive literature. You are denied access to braille books and audio tapes.*
11. *You are too poor to buy a loaf of bread because you've spent all your money on champagne.*
12. *You are simply too poor to buy a loaf of bread, not through any fault of your own.*

Positive freedom

Positive freedom is a more difficult notion to grasp than negative. Put simply it is freedom to do something rather than freedom from interference. Negative freedom is simply a matter of the number and kind of options that lie open for you and their relevance for your life; it is a matter of what you aren't prevented from doing; the doors that lie unlocked. Positive freedom, in contrast, is a matter of what you can actually do. All sorts of doors may be open, giving you a large amount of negative freedom, and yet you might find that there are still obstacles to taking full advantage of your opportunities. Berlin sometimes talks of positive liberty in terms of the question 'Who is master?' I want to be in control of my life, but there may, for example, be internal obstacles to my living the way I

really want to. Here we might talk of my increasing my freedom (in the positive sense) by overcoming my less rational desires.

This is easier to understand if you consider some examples. I might recognize the value of study for making my life go well, but keep getting sidetracked by less important, immediately gratifying activities, such as going out for a drink, or staying in and spending the whole evening watching 'soaps' on television. I know that studying is important to me, and will increase my control over my life. But I really enjoy going out for a drink and I really enjoy watching television 'soaps'. So the short-term gratifications tend to seduce me away from activities which are better for me in the long term. My positive freedom would be increased if my 'higher' rational side could overcome my 'lower' tendency to be sidetracked. It is not a question of having more, or more significant, opportunities: the opportunity for me to study is there now. Rather it is a question of being able to take advantage of the opportunity by being in control of my life. Positive freedom in this example is a matter of my having the capacity to take the rational option as well as having the opportunity: whereas, according to a concept of negative freedom, the opportunities that I have alone determine the extent of my freedom. I am free to study in the negative sense since no one is preventing me from doing it; no one has locked away my books, or hidden my pen and paper; no one has dragged me out of the door to go to the pub, or chained me to my armchair in front of the television. However, I am not free in the positive sense; I am not truly free, because I am a slave to my tendency to be sidetracked. True positive freedom would involve seizing control of my life and making rational choices for myself. Those who defend positive freedom believe that just because no one is preventing you from doing something, it does not follow that you are genuinely free. Positive freedom is a matter of achieving your potential, not just having potential.

To achieve 'true' freedom, your higher self must have control over the impulses of the

lower self. Otherwise, you are simply a slave to passing emotions and desires. From this it should be clear that the notion of positive liberty may rely on the belief that the self can be split into a higher and a lower self, and that the higher or rational self's priorities should be encouraged to overcome the lower, less rational self's inclinations: the passing desires that if acted on can so upset a life plan. The higher self has desires for what will make the individual's life go well; it wishes to pursue worthwhile and noble goals. The lower self is easily led astray, often by irrational appetites. Consequently, advocates of positive liberty argue, we need to be protected against our own lower selves in order to realize the goals of our higher, 'true' selves. In many cases this can only be achieved by coercing us to behave in ways which seem to go against our desires; in fact this coercion is necessary to allow us to fulfil our rational higher desires, desires which we may even be unaware of having. On this view, the freedom which is self-mastery, or positive freedom, may only be achievable if our lower selves are constrained in their actions. By preventing me from going out for a drink or from watching television all night you may help me to realize my 'true' freedom which is achievable only if I spend a significant portion of my available time studying. This is what I would have wanted had I been truly free. If Boswell had been forced to go home straight after dinner rather than given the opportunity to spend the night with a prostitute, his positive freedom might have been significantly extended.

It is important to realize that Berlin's notion of positive liberty doesn't just apply to self-mastery at the individual level; it also encompasses theories of freedom which emphasize collective control over common life. So, for example, when someone calls a society a free society because its members play an active role in controlling it through their participation in democratic institutions, they are appealing to a notion of positive freedom rather than of negative freedom. In this example the people as a whole are free because they, collectively, have mastery over the life of their society. A free society based upon the concept of negative

freedom would typically be one in which state interference in individual lives is kept to a minimum. This would not necessarily be a democratic society since a benevolent dictator might be concerned to provide an extensive realm of individual negative freedom for each of his or her subjects.

Which sort of conception of freedom, positive or negative, is appealed to in each case?

1. *The state intervenes to prevent an alcoholic drinking himself to death on the grounds that this is what, in his sober and rational moments, he would clearly desire and so is a basic condition of his gaining true freedom.*
2. *The state protects an alcoholic's freedom to consume huge amounts of whisky in the privacy of her own home.*
3. *I cease to be free when I follow my baser sensual appetites: I am in thrall to mere passing desire.*
4. *I don't need the nanny state forcing me to have fluoride in my drinking water for my own good: that infringes my freedom.*
5. *You can only really be free in a well-governed state with harsh but well-chosen laws which shape your life in a rational way, thereby encouraging you to flourish. Increasing your opportunities to make a mess of your life doesn't increase your freedom in any meaningful sense.*