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Two concepts of freedom

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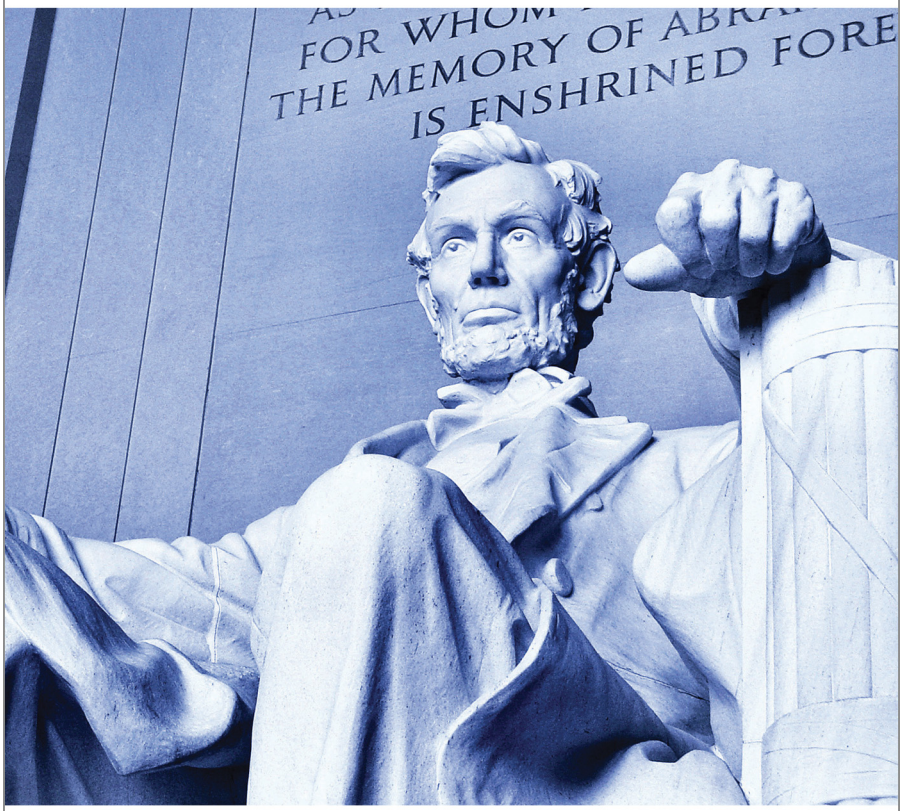

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Introduction

‘Freedom’ can mean many different things. Here we're concerned with political freedom. Isaiah Berlin distinguished between a concept of negative freedom and a concept of positive freedom. You will examine these concepts and learn to recognise the difference between freedom from constraint and the freedom that comes from self-mastery or self-realisation.

The following material is taken from the book *Arguments for Freedom* ‘1999’ authored by Nigel Warburton of The Open University.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- distinguish between negative and positive concepts of freedom
- understand the main points in Isaiah Berlin's article *'Two Concepts of Liberty'*
- recognise emotive language, to distinguish between necessary truths and contingent facts, and to appreciate what is involved in refutation by counterexample.

1 Introducing the concept of freedom

What are the limits of individual freedom in a civilised society? Should we tolerate unlimited freedom of speech, no matter how offensive the views expressed? Can the state ever be justified in interfering with what consenting adults choose to do in private? When, if ever, is coercion acceptable? Are all laws obstacles to freedom, or are they the very condition of achieving it? Should we sometimes force people to be free, or is that a contradiction in terms? These are serious questions. They're not merely abstract puzzles for philosophers to ponder in comfortable armchairs. They are the sorts of issues that people are prepared to die for.

Even if you choose to ignore them, the way other people answer these questions will impinge on your life. Philosophers at least since Plato's time have put forward answers to them. Here we'll be examining the arguments some of them have used. However, this won't just be a survey of some interesting thoughts on the subject. The point is to engage with the arguments: to examine their structure and content to see if they really support their conclusions. You needn't agree with these conclusions. As long as you think critically about the concept of freedom and are capable of arguing your case rather than simply stating your prejudices, you will be reading in the spirit in which they are intended.

To live in a society requires all kinds of co-operation. Usually this means curbing some of our more selfish desires in order to accommodate other people's interests. That is an element of the human situation. Given that our desires often conflict, it would be impossible for us to live in a society which imposed no limits whatsoever on what we do. It would be absurd to argue that we should all have complete licence to do whatever takes our fancy no matter who is affected by our actions. I shouldn't be allowed to walk into your house and help myself to your stereo and television. Hardly anyone would argue that I should be free to steal your possessions simply because I want them; but deciding where to set the limits on individual freedom in less extreme cases is no easy task.

2 The word ‘freedom’

The word ‘freedom’ can have powerful emotive force, that is, the power to arouse strong emotions. Its connotations are almost exclusively positive. If you describe a group as ‘freedom fighters’ this suggests that you approve of the cause for which they are fighting; call them ‘terrorists’ and you make clear your disapproval.

Activity 1: Emotive words

The following statements all use language calculated to arouse emotion. Make a note of the words which are particularly emotive.

1. Meat is murder.
2. The workers in this factory are little more than beasts of burden driven on by an evil capitalist master.
3. I am firm, you are obstinate, he is pigheaded.
4. Television is entertainment for philistines.
5. Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.

1. murder.
2. beasts of burden, evil, master.
3. obstinate, pig-headed.
4. philistines.
5. never, never, never, slaves.

‘Freedom’ is not usually a neutral term. Freedom seems noble and worthy. It is hard to imagine anyone declaring that they are fundamentally opposed to it. Many people have laid down their lives in the name of freedom, or of liberty (like most writers on the subject, I'll be using the words ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ interchangeably here); yet we should not lose sight of the fact that ‘freedom’ is used to mean many different and sometimes incompatible things. Just because one word (or two, if you count ‘liberty’) is used, it does not follow that there is one thing to which it refers. A quick perusal of the philosophical writing about freedom will reveal the wide variety of approaches to political life which have been defended in the name of freedom.

The arguments we'll be examining are arguments for **political** or **social** freedom: the freedom of the individual in relation to other people and to the state. The aim is to explain and unravel some arguments for this kind of freedom. In the process we'll be examining some of the classic philosophical defences of particular types of freedom. The stress will always be on the arguments used rather than on the detailed historical context in which the views were originally expressed. Many of the central arguments transfer readily to the contemporary situation, if you make appropriate changes. They contribute to the pressing debates about the limits of individual freedom that affect us today.

You might think that the meaning of ‘freedom’ is straightforward: at an individual level it means not being imprisoned. If I'm imprisoned then, obviously, I'm not free. I can't choose to go out for a stroll, eat a pizza, go to the cinema, and so on. But on the other hand, even as a prisoner, I am likely to be free in many respects. I am free to think about whatever I

want to think about. In all but the cruellest prison regimes I will be free to pace around my cell, do a few push-ups or stare blankly at the wall; I'll also be free to write a letter to my family, perhaps even to study for an Open University degree, and so on. However, this may be a sentimental view of what prison life is actually like for most prisoners. Several of the activities I have described, particularly studying, require a certain amount of concentration. For most of us concentration requires relative quiet. Here is one prisoner's account of trying to study for an Open University course:

> One of the main problems is that of noise. Jail is a very noisy place and it is rarely quiet. The quietest periods are after 8.30 at night and the normal lockup times. At other times it is very hard to concentrate with all the noise. I can't study during communal periods because of the loudness of the TV. Noise is a major problem.
>
> (Ashley, et al. (1994), p. 12)

So is this prisoner really free to study? Although the prison authorities don't actively prevent him from doing so, the noise in the prison at some times of the day does. A prisoner's freedom may be curtailed in many ways beyond preventing him or her leaving the prison, and not all of those curtailments of freedom are necessarily a result of someone **deliberately** imposing restrictions on behaviour. Nevertheless, most prisoners have considerably more freedom in most respects than did Gulliver, in Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), when he woke up after being shipwrecked on the shore of Lilliput:

> I attempted to rise, but was not able to stir: for as I happened to lie on my back, I found my arms and legs were strongly fastened on each side to the ground; and my hair, which was long and thick, tied down in the same manner. I likewise felt several slender ligatures across my body, from my armpits to my thighs. I could only look upwards, the sun began to grow hot, and the light offended my eyes. I heard a confused noise about me, but in the posture I lay, could see nothing except the sky.
>
> (Swift (1985 edn), p. 55)

In this condition, Gulliver had virtually no freedom of movement. Even physical freedom is not a matter of all or nothing, but rather of degree. You may be imprisoned, but there are still further freedoms that you can lose.

For a nation, ‘freedom’ may mean not being occupied. France during most of the Second World War was not a free country in this sense as it was occupied by the Nazis or controlled by the Vichy government. The Resistance saw themselves as **freedom** fighters, risking their lives to liberate France. Their aim was quite simply a free France, which meant a France which was free from Nazi occupation. Yet when France was liberated it did not miraculously become free in every respect; nor were the French completely constrained in what they could do while the Nazis were in occupation.

However, ‘a free nation’ or ‘a free state’ may also mean one that is not totalitarian. A totalitarian state is one in which the state authorities, in principle at least, exercise control over most aspects of subjects’ lives. Totalitarianism may take many different forms. Its essence, in its most extreme form, is captured in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: because the state authorities want to have complete control over individuals’ lives, there is an elaborate mechanism for surveillance, summed up in the slogan ‘Big Brother is Watching You’:

> A Party Member lives from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police. Even when he is alone he can never be sure that he is alone. Wherever he may be, asleep or awake, working or resting, in his bath or in bed, he can be inspected without warning and without knowing that he is being inspected. Nothing that he does is indifferent. His friendships, his relaxations, his behaviour towards his wife and children, the expression of his face when he is alone, the words he mutters in sleep, even the characteristic movements of his body, are all jealously scrutinised. Not only any actual misdemeanour, but any eccentricity, however small, any change of habits, any nervous mannerism that could possibly be the symptom of an inner struggle, is certain to be detected. He has no freedom of choice in any direction whatever.
>
> (Orwell (1989 edn), p. 219)

In such a totalitarian state there is no significant private realm in which individuals can exercise free choice: every area of life is subject to control by the state authorities. Here, then, is another sense in which a state or nation can lack freedom.

What these examples show is that freedom isn't a matter of all or nothing. You can be free in some respects and not in others (usually the context in which freedom is being discussed makes clear what kind of freedom is at stake). And you can have a greater or lesser degree of a particular freedom.

When philosophers ask ‘What is political freedom?’ they are not asking for a dictionary definition. ‘Political Freedom’, unlike, say, ‘aardvark’, isn't the sort of phrase that a dictionary definition is likely to shed much light upon. There is, as far as I know, no controversy about what an aardvark is. It is a species of animal: my dictionary says ‘the ant bear, a South African edentate’. If I were unsure whether or not the animal in front of me was an aardvark, a competent zoologist could easily set me straight. There are established criteria for determining which animals are aardvarks: if an animal meets these criteria, then it must be an aardvark. But political freedom is a notion that has been argued about for centuries: there is no uncontroversial way of defining it. The definition you give usually implies a particular view about human beings and about the things we do or should value most. In this respect it is more like ‘art’ than like ‘aardvark’. There are numerous, conflicting definitions of what art is. Similarly there are many different views about what political freedom is, and in particular about where its limits should be set.

3 Isaiah Berlin's ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1958)

3.1 Preamble

In a ground-breaking lecture, the philosopher and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) argued that there are two basic types of freedom which have been defended by philosophers and political theorists: **negative** freedom and **positive** freedom. Within each category there is scope for quite a wide range of positions; but most theories of freedom fit quite comfortably into one category or the other.

Berlin's article is important for three reasons. First, it provides a useful distinction between these two types of freedom. Secondly, it makes a case for the view that theories of positive freedom have often been used as instruments of oppression. Thirdly, by describing the incompatibility of various fundamental human aims in life, it suggests a reason why we put such a high value on freedom. For our purposes, the most important feature is the first, the distinction between the two types of freedom: negative and positive.

3.2 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 (1969), pp. 121–2; see, p. 155)

Or, more simply, ‘Over what area am I master?’ (ibid., p. xliii). 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. This is how Berlin puts it:

> The extent of a man's negative liberty is, as it were, a function of what doors, and how many are open to him; upon what prospects they open; and how open they are.
>
> (Ibid., p.xlviii)

(It is worth bearing in mind when reading extracts from Berlin's article that it was written in the late 1950s when there was little concern about the apparent sexism of using the word ‘man’ to mean ‘human’, i.e. man or woman. He certainly does not intend to imply that only men can be free, or that only men can limit another's freedom. For ‘man’ read ‘human being’ or ‘person’.)

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.
>
> (Ibid, p.xlii)

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. (Hegel was a philosopher (1790–1831) justifiably renowned for the obscurity of most of his writing.) 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.

Read the following extract from Berlin's article. Then do the activity below.

> 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. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be, enslaved. Coercion is not, however, a term that covers every form of inability. If I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, or cannot understand the darker pages of Hegel, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced. Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other

human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings. Mere incapacity to attain a goal is not lack of political freedom.*

* Helvetius [1715–71] made this point very clearly: 'The free man is the man who is not in irons, nor imprisoned in a gaol, nor terrorized like a slave by the fear of punishment… it is not lack of freedom not to fly like an eagle or swim like a whale.'

(Ibid., p. 122; see, p. 156)

Activity 2: Negative freedom

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

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.

Compare your answers with the answers and explanations below before reading on.

(1), (5), (6), (8), (9) and (10) are all straightforward restrictions of negative freedom. (2) almost certainly isn't (unless someone has somehow restricted your growth). (11) isn't a restriction of negative liberty. (7) probably isn't, unless you are an outstanding footballer whom someone has deliberately prevented from playing football for your country. (4) and (12) could involve restrictions on negative liberty if someone else's actions were making you poor (or at least not rich enough to do the things described).

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. This becomes clear in the following passage from Berlin's essay:

> It is argued, very plausibly, that if a man is too poor to afford something on which there is no legal ban – a loaf of bread, a journey round the world, recourse to the law courts – he is as little free to have it as he would be if it were forbidden him by law. If my poverty were a kind of disease, which prevented me from buying bread, or paying for the journey round the world or getting my case heard, as lameness prevents me from running, this inability would not naturally be described as a lack of freedom, least of all political freedom. It is only because I believe that my inability to get a given thing is due to the fact that other human beings have made arrangements whereby I am, whereas others are not, prevented from having enough money with which to pay for it, that I think myself a victim of coercion or slavery.
>
> ‘The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does’, said Rousseau. The criterion of oppression is the part that I believe to be played by other human beings, directly or indirectly with or without the intention of doing so, in frustrating my wishes. By being free in this sense I mean not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom.
>
> (Ibid., pp. 122–3; see, p. 156)

If the man described above is too poor to buy a loaf of bread as a consequence of other people's actions, then, whether these other people intended this effect or not, his freedom has been curtailed. But if his poverty is a result of non-human causes, such as a drought-induced famine, or some natural disaster, terrible as his plight might be, it would not limit his negative freedom.

3.3 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 recognise 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.

Consider another example, a real one this time. James Boswell, the eighteenth-century diarist and biographer of Dr Johnson, included the following in his journal for Sunday 31 March 1776. It describes how he spent a night in London following a dinner with friends:

> I behaved pretty decently. But when I got into the street, the whoring rage came upon me. I thought I would devote a night to it. I was weary at the same time that I was tumultuous. I went to Charing Cross Bagnio with a wholesome-looking, bouncing wench, stripped, and went to bed with her. But after my desires were satiated by repeated indulgence, I could not rest; so I parted from her after she had honestly delivered to me my watch and ring and handkerchief, which I should not have missed I was so drunk. I took a hackney-coach and was set down in Berkeley Square, and went home cold and disturbed and dreary and vexed, with remorse rising like a black cloud without any distinct form; for in truth my moral principle as to chastity was absolutely eclipsed for a time. I was in the miserable state of those whom the Apostle represents as working all uncleanness with greediness. I thought of my valuable spouse with the highest regard and warmest affection, but had a confused notion that my corporeal connection with whores did not interfere with my love for her. Yet I considered that I might injure my health, which there could be no doubt was an injury to her. This is an exact state of my mind at the time. It shocks me to review it.
>
> (Boswell (1992 edn), p. 295)

Here Boswell's confession reveals clearly the tension between two sides of his character. In his sober reflection he can see the foolishness of his having spent the night with a prostitute. Even soon after the event he is stricken with remorse, which he attempts to dispel by means of the transparent rationalisation that somehow, despite breaking his principle of chastity, his infidelity does not interfere with his love for his wife. Yet he can't hide behind self-serving justifications for long, when he realises that he has risked catching a venereal disease, something that undoubtedly has the potential to harm her. His higher self endorses a principle of chastity and fidelity; his lower self succumbs to temptations of the flesh. According to some theories of positive freedom, Boswell's ‘true’ freedom could only be realised by achieving a greater degree of self-mastery. 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; lusts in this case. Sober, Boswell is shocked by his actions of the previous night. Perhaps the only way he could have achieved ‘true’ freedom in the circumstances, given his lustful nature, would be to have been forced to go straight home to bed after dining with his friends. This would certainly have infringed his negative liberty in the sense of reducing his opportunities, but

it would have allowed him to do what at some level he felt was best for him, and thereby to enjoy positive freedom in this respect.

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 realise 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 realise 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.

This is Berlin's description of positive liberty and its origins:

> The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role – that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them. This is at least part of what I mean when I say that I am rational, and that it is my reason that distinguishes me as a human being from the rest of the world. I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for his choices and able to explain them by reference to his own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realize that it is not.
>
> (Ibid., p. 131; see, pp. 160–1)

It is important to realise 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 emphasise 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.

Activity 3: Positive and negative freedom

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. It is an infringement on my freedom to prevent me from engaging in consensual sado-masochism in the privacy of my own dungeon.
5. I don't need the nanny state forcing me to have fluoride in my drinking water for my own good: that infringes my freedom.
6. 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.

Compare your answers with those below before reading on.

1. positive.
2. negative.
3. positive.
4. negative.
5. negative.
6. positive.

Berlin's distinction between negative and positive freedom remains a useful one, and much of are structured around it. However, his aim in the paper was not simply to make the distinction, but rather to make a claim about the ways in which theories of positive freedom have been misused.

3.4 The misuse of the concept of positive liberty

One of the main claims that Berlin makes in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ is a historical one. It is that positive theories of freedom, or perversions of them, have been more frequently used as instruments of oppression than have negative ones. These positive theories typically rely on a split between a ‘higher’ and a ‘lower’ self, or between a ‘rational’ and an ‘empirical’ self as Berlin sometimes puts it. Coercion is justified on the grounds that it leads to a realisation of the aims of the higher or rational self, even if the lower, everyday, empirical self opposes the coercion with all its might. The final humiliation in such a situation is to be told that, despite appearances, what is going on is not coercion, since it

actually increases your freedom. In other words, Berlin believes that positive theories of freedom have historically been used to justify some kinds of oppression and that it is a relatively short step from saying that freedom involves self-mastery to the justification of all kinds of state interference in the lives of individuals on the grounds that, in Rousseau's words, it can, in some circumstances, be right to be ‘forced to be free’.

Read the following extract from Berlin's article (ibid., pp. 131–4; see, pp. 161–3), and then answer the questions below.

> 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 – no more than negative and positive ways of saying much the same thing. 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.
>
> One way of making this clear is in terms of the independent momentum which the, initially perhaps quite harmless, metaphor of self-mastery acquired. ‘I am
>
> my own master’; ‘I am slave to no man’; but may I not (as Platonists or Hegelians tend to say) be a slave to nature? Or to my own ‘unbridled’ passions? Are these not so many species of the identical genus ‘slave’ – some political or legal, others moral or spiritual? Have not men had the experience of liberating themselves from spiritual slavery, or slavery to nature, and do
>
> they not in the course of it become aware, on the one hand, of a self which dominates, and, on the other, of something in them which is brought to heel? This dominant self is then variously identified with reason, with my ‘higher nature’, with the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my ‘real’, or ‘ideal’, or ‘autonomous’ self, or with my self ‘at its
>
> best’; which is then contrasted with irrational impulse, uncontrolled desires, my ‘lower’ nature, the pursuit of immediate pleasures, my ‘empirical’ or ‘heteronomous’ self, swept by every gust of desire and passion, needing to be rigidly disciplined if it is ever to rise to the full height of its ‘real’ nature. Presently the two selves may be represented as divided by an even larger gap:
>
> the real self may be conceived as something wider than the individual (as the term is normally understood), as a social ‘whole’ of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a church, a state, the great society of the living and the dead and the yet unborn. This entity is then identified as being the ‘true’ self which, by imposing its collective, or ‘organic’, single will upon its
>
> recalcitrant ‘members’, achieves its own, and therefore their, ‘higher’ freedom. The perils of using organic metaphors to justify the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a ‘higher’ level of freedom have often been pointed out. But what gives such plausibility as it has to this kind of language is that we recognize that it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men
>
> in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt. This renders it easy for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest. I am then claiming that I know what they truly need better than they know it
>
> themselves. What, at most, this entails is that they would not resist me if they were rational and as wise as I and understood their interests as I do. But I may go on to claim a good deal more than this. I may declare that they are actually aiming at what in their benighted state they consciously resist, because there exists within them an occult entity – their latent rational will, or their ‘true’

purpose – and that this entity, although it is belied by all that they overtly feel and do and say, is their 'real' self, of which the poor empirical self in space and time may know nothing or little; and that this inner spirit is the only self that deserves to have its wishes taken into account. Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress,

torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfilment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his 'true', albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self.

This paradox has been often exposed. It is one thing to say that I know what

is good for X, while he himself does not; and even to ignore his wishes for its – and his – sake; and a very different one to say that he has *eo ipso* chosen it, not indeed consciously, not as he seems in everyday life, but in his role as a rational self which his empirical self may not know – the 'real' self which discerns the good, and cannot help choosing it once it is revealed. This

monstrous impersonation, which consists in equating what X would choose if he were something he is not, or at least not yet, with what X actually seeks and chooses, is at the heart of all political theories of self-realization. It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good which I am too blind to see: this may, on occasion, be for my benefit; indeed it may enlarge the scope

of my liberty. It is another to say that if it is my good, then I am not being coerced, for I have willed it, whether I know this or not, and am free (or 'truly' free) even while my poor earthly body and foolish mind bitterly reject it, and struggle against those who seek however benevolently to impose it, with the greatest desperation.

Activity 4: Comprehension

1. Lines 1–2. Which of the following two phrases describes the concept of positive freedom and which the concept of negative freedom?
   1. 'The freedom which consists in being one's own master.'
   2. 'The freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men.'
2. Lines 8–30. Put the main point of these lines in your own words. You should not use more than fifty words to do this.
3. Lines 16–30. Why has Berlin put the words 'real' and 'higher' in such phrases as ' "real" nature' and ' "higher" freedom' within scare quotes?
4. Berlin (lines 31–41) says that coercing people for their own sake is sometimes justifiable. What, then, is the 'good deal more than this' which advocates of positive liberty sometimes go on to claim (lines 42–53)?
5. A paradox is a situation which yields an apparent contradiction. What is the paradox that Berlin refers to in line 54?

Compare your answers with those below. Then re-read the whole extract before reading on. You should find that your understanding of the main points made in the passage has increased significantly.

1.
   1.

positive.

2.

negative.

2. The metaphor of being master over one's own life, no one's slave, still leaves open the possibility of being a slave to one's own passions. The idea of a higher and rational self (the master), which should keep in check the lower irrational self (the unruly slave), comes from this.
3. Berlin put these words within inverted commas to indicate that he does not necessarily accept that such a nature is **real** or that such a self, if it exists, is **higher**. He is reporting how other people use these words rather than endorsing this way of speaking himself.
4. Berlin claims that some advocates of positive liberty have gone so far as to insist that other people don't necessarily know what they really want, what their higher selves seek. Such advocates of positive liberty may ignore what other people say they want and bully, oppress or torture them on the grounds that that is what their ‘real’ selves would want. This, they claim, is not coercion, since it is what their victims’ ‘real’ selves wish for. It is not a case of forcing people to do what would be good for them because they can't appreciate what is good for them; it is a matter of forcing people to do what at a level unavailable to them they, allegedly, wish to do.
5. The paradox is that people are forced to do what they say they don't want to do on the grounds that they really do want to do it. What they really want to do, on this analysis, is what they really don't want to do.

Although Berlin doesn't actually use the term, in the passage you have just read Berlin contrasts **paternalism** with a particular way in which the concept of positive freedom has frequently been misused. Paternalism is coercing people for their own sake. An example of paternalism is putting fluoride in drinking water, whether or not the population wants it there, on the grounds that it will significantly reduce the incidence of tooth decay, and thus improve the health of the population. The fluoride is added for the good of the people who drink the water, whether they realise that it will do them good or not. Misuse of positive freedom differs from this in that it involves the claim that the coercion is something the people coerced have, in a sense, chosen: they have ‘chosen’ it as rational selves, but not in the everyday sense of ‘chosen’. Though it might not seem like it to them, they are, allegedly, freer as a result of the coercion. In other words, this misuse of positive freedom rests on the belief that it can be acceptable to force people to be free. Indeed, in some cases this seems to be the only way in which, according to the theory, some individuals will ever attain ‘true’ freedom. This move from positive liberty to forcing people to be ‘free’ has, in recent history, led to oppression on a massive scale. It has been the source of much misery and many ruined lives.

It is important to realise that Berlin is **not** saying that only the concept of positive liberty can be misused. In fact it is obvious that versions of the negative concept can also be used to justify some terrible states of affairs. In some situations, preserving individuals' freedom from interference might be tantamount to encouraging the strong to thrive at the expense of the weak. As it has been memorably put, ‘Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows’. The pike might think it an excellent idea to allow fish to go about their business unimpeded by rules or interventions. The minnows, who stand to be his lunch, will no

doubt see the limitations of a negative theory of liberty which allowed them to be eaten on the grounds that otherwise the pike's freedom would have been seriously curtailed.

However, although theories based on a concept of negative liberty can lead to unsatisfactory situations, Berlin's point is that historically this is not usually what has happened. It is the theories of positive liberty which have led to human tragedy on a massive scale. The terrible irony is that the justification for oppression has so often been that coercion actually increases the ‘real’ or ‘true’ freedom of the coerced.

Berlin has sometimes been interpreted as saying that all theories of positive freedom are bad, and that the only type of theory worth defending is one based on the concept of negative freedom – freedom from interference. But this is a misinterpretation which he has been at pains to dispel. For instance, he has written:

> ‘Positive’ liberty, conceived as the answer to the question, ‘By whom am I to be governed?’, is a valid universal goal. I do not know why I should have been held to doubt this… I can only repeat that the perversion of the notion of positive liberty into its opposite – the apotheosis of authority – did occur, and has for a long while been one of the most familiar and depressing phenomena of our time. For whatever reason or cause, the notion of ‘negative’ liberty (conceived as the answer to the question ‘How much am I governed?’) however disastrous the consequences of its unbridled forms, has not historically been twisted by its theorists as often or as effectively into anything so darkly metaphysical or socially sinister or remote from its original meaning as its ‘positive’ counterpart. The first can be turned into its opposite and still exploit the favourable associations of its innocent origins. The second has, much more frequently, been seen, for better and for worse, for what it was; there has been no lack of emphasis, in the last hundred years, upon its more disastrous implications. Hence, the greater need, it seems to me, to expose the aberrations of positive liberty than those of its negative brother.
>
> (Berlin (1969), p. xlvii)

He has also expanded on this topic in an interview:

> The only reason for which I have been suspected of defending negative liberty against positive and saying that it is more civilized, is because I do think that the concept of positive liberty, which is of course essential to a decent existence, has been more often abused or perverted than that of negative liberty. Both are genuine questions; both are inescapable… Both these concepts have been politically and morally twisted into their opposites. George Orwell is excellent on this. People say ‘I express your real wishes. You may think that you know what you want, but I, the Fuhrer, we the Party Central Committee, know you better than you know yourself, and provide you with what you would ask for if you recognised your "real" needs.’ Negative liberty is twisted when I am told that liberty must be equal for the tigers and for 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 to be used. Of course unlimited liberty for capitalists destroys the liberty of the workers, unlimited liberty for factory-owners or parents will allow children to be employed in the coal-mines. Certainly the weak must be protected against the strong, and liberty to that extent be curtailed. Negative liberty must be curtailed if positive liberty is to be sufficiently realised; there must be a balance between the two, about which no clear principles can be enunciated. Positive and negative liberty are both perfectly valid concepts, but it seems to me that

> historically more damage has been done by pseudo-positive than by pseudo-negative liberty in the modern world.
>
> (Jahanbegloo (1993), p. 41)

As can be seen from the mention of the Fuhrer and of the Party Central Committee, Berlin believes that in the twentieth century both Nazism and communism have perverted the notion of positive freedom and that both Nazi and communist states have coerced their citizens, often against their will, to realise what their coercers believe to be their ‘true’ freedom, or the ‘true’ freedom of their nation state.

Berlin is making a generalisation about the concept of positive freedom on the basis of his observation of history, some of it first hand (as a boy, he witnessed the Russian revolutions of 1917). This is a historical thesis rather than a philosophical one: it is a thesis about what has actually happened. In the part of his paper where he puts forward this thesis, Berlin is writing more as a historian of ideas than as a philosopher pure and simple. In Berlin's case his activity as a historian and as a philosopher are intimately entwined. However, it is important to realise that philosophers don't primarily put forward empirical hypotheses: their main concerns are the analysis of concepts (such as Berlin engages in, in his examination of the nature of the two types of freedom); and the analysis of arguments.)

The argument Berlin has presented about past perversions of the concept of positive freedom is based on empirical evidence; that is, its truth or falsity depends on facts, facts which are ultimately discovered by observation. It is not a logically necessary consequence of the intrinsic nature of the concept of positive freedom that it is prone to this sort of misuse. It is a **contingent** fact: this is just how it is, but it could have been otherwise. This distinction between what is logically necessary and what is contingent is an important one. If something is logically necessary you can't deny it without contradicting yourself. For example, it is logically necessary that all vertebrates have backbones; it is true by definition since ‘vertebrate’ just means ‘creature with a backbone’. Similarly it is necessarily true that if someone is dead they are no longer living: that just follows from the meaning of ‘dead’. Saying ‘I've found a vertebrate with no backbone’, or ‘My uncle is dead but he's still alive’ (unless you are giving a new meaning to ‘vertebrate’ or ‘alive’, in which case you would be guilty of equivocation) involves a contradiction. It would be like saying ‘Here is a creature which both has and does not have a backbone’ or ‘My uncle both is and is not alive’. In contrast contingent facts need not be as they are: as a consequence we usually have to make some sort of observation or conduct some sort of experiment to discover what they are. So, for example, it could have turned out historically that a concept of negative freedom was more often used as an excuse for oppression than a positive one. It is a contingent fact that, at least according to Berlin, things are the other way round. The way Berlin arrived at his conclusion was by considering the evidence of recent history.

Activity 5: Necessary truths and contingent statements

Which of the following are logically necessary truths, and which contingent statements?

1. All aardvarks are animals.
2. All heads of industry are overpaid.
3. Many philosophers wear glasses.

4. Some politicians are corrupt.
5. Nothing that is red all over is turquoise.
6. Everyone who is over 18 is over 16.
7. The concept of negative freedom has rarely been invoked to justify oppression.

Check your answers against those below before reading on.

1. logically necessary.
2. contingent.
3. contingent.
4. contingent.
5. logically necessary.
6. logically necessary.
7. contingent.

3.5 The notion of a final solution

Motivating much of Berlin's essay on the two concepts of liberty is a pair of related beliefs. First he believes that the notion of a so-called ‘final solution’, the belief that ultimately all human differences of goal can be reconciled, has led to terrible consequences, often to atrocities. Secondly, he believes that there is not, in principle, any way of resolving the widely different goals that human beings have. There can, then, be no simple panacea to cure all the problems that arise as a result of conflicting aims. This second belief goes some way to explaining why we place such a high value on negative freedom.

Here is his account of the consequences of attempting a final solution (a term which he presumably chose for its emotive force given that it is the term which is usually used for Hitler's attempt to exterminate the Jewish people):

> One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals – justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another…
>
> It is a commonplace that neither political equality nor efficient organisation nor social justice is compatible with more than a modicum of individual liberty, and certainly not with unrestricted *laissez-faire*; that justice and generosity, public and private loyalties, the demands of genius and the claims of society, can conflict violently with each other. And it is no great way from that to the generalisation that not all good things are compatible, still less all the ideals of mankind. But somewhere, we shall be told and in some way, it must be possible for all these values to live together, for unless this is so, the universe is not a

> cosmos, not a harmony; unless this is so, conflicts of value may be an intrinsic irremovable element in human life. To admit that the fulfilment of some of our ideals may in principle make the fulfilment of others impossible is to say that the notion of total human fulfilment is a formal contradiction, a metaphysical chimera.
>
> (Berlin, op. cit., pp. 167–8)

The central point here, like the argument about past misuses of the notion of positive liberty discussed in Section 3.4, is a historical claim, a pessimistic one. Berlin is saying that historically the belief in a 'final solution', a way of harmonising all the different goals that human beings have, has had disastrous consequences for those whose goals don't happen to have fitted neatly into the master plan.

However, towards the end of this quotation he introduces a different idea, namely that the different goals may in principle be irreconcilable: perhaps there just can't be a way of harmonising all the different goals (such as justice, equality and the cultivation of geniuses), that people have and do consider worthwhile. If this thesis is true, then it follows that 'the notion of total human fulfilment is a formal contradiction'.

What this means is that the notion of total human fulfilment embodies an unachievable goal. If it is a necessary feature of human goals that they can't all simultaneously be achieved, then it follows that any theory that says they can is self-contradictory: it will end up implying both that human goals cannot all be fulfilled and that they can, which is a logical absurdity. In other words, Berlin is suggesting that the notion of human goals carries within it the implication that not all human goals can be fulfilled. But what is his evidence for this pessimistic conclusion?

He considers two possibilities: first that there might be some *a priori* guarantee of the notion that the goals different people have can actually be harmonised. By '*a priori* guarantee' he means an argument that doesn't rely on empirical observation, but rather provides a logically secure proof of the point independently of any evidence. We can, for instance, know that all aardvarks are animals independently of conducting any experiments on actual aardvarks; this is because it is true by definition that all aardvarks are animals. You can know *a priori* that if you have in your sack something that isn't an animal, then it certainly isn't an aardvark. So, returning to Berlin's discussion: he suggests that there is no *a priori* guarantee that human goals can all in fact be achieved. He assumes this, rather than providing any argument to show that it is true. If we accept this point (which is reasonable enough since it is unclear how we could know *a priori* that all human goals could in principle be harmonised), we must fall back on observation. Do we, then, have any empirical evidence that all human goals might in fact be fulfilled? Or, to put it another way, has human history provided us with any evidence that would suggest the fundamental compatibility of the diverse goals that different human beings seek and value? Berlin's answer to these questions is a straight 'No':

> But if we are not armed with an *a priori* guarantee of the proposition that a total harmony of true values is somewhere to be found – perhaps in some ideal realm the characteristics of which we can, in our finite state, not so much as conceive – we must fall back on the ordinary resources of empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge. And these certainly give us no warrant for supposing (or even understanding what would be meant by saying) that all good things, or all bad things for that matter, are reconcilable with each other. 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. Indeed, it is because this is their situation that men place such immense value upon the freedom to choose; for if they had assurance that in some perfect state, realisable by men on earth, no ends pursued by them would ever be in conflict, the necessity and agony of choice would disappear, and with it the central importance of the freedom to choose. Any method of bringing this final state nearer would then seem fully justified, no matter how much freedom were sacrificed to forward its advance. It is, I have no doubt some such dogmatic certainty that has been responsible for the deep, serene, unshakeable conviction in the minds of some of the most merciless tyrants and persecutors in history that what they did was fully justified by its purpose. I do not say that the ideal of self-perfection – whether for individuals or nations or churches or classes – is to be condemned in itself, or that the language which was used in its defence was in all cases the result of a confused or fraudulent use of words, or of moral or intellectual perversity. Indeed, I have tried to show that it is the notion of freedom in its ‘positive’ sense that is at the heart of the demands for national or social self-direction which animate the most powerful and morally just public movements of our time, and that not to recognise this is to misunderstand the most vital facts and ideas of our age. But equally it seems to me that the belief that some single formula can in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realised is demonstrably false. If, as I believe, the ends of men are many and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.
>
> (Ibid., pp. 168–9)

If Berlin is right that it is a fundamental and inescapable feature of being human that we have to choose between incompatible alternatives (both as individuals and as members of a society), in a sense creating ourselves through our choices, then this helps to explain why freedom is so important to us. It is through our freely made choices that we make ourselves what we are, whether as individuals or societies. If there were some true ‘final solution’, then it wouldn't matter whether we made the choices, or someone else made the right ones for us: one simple concept of positive freedom would be sufficient, and coercion might be justified on the basis of it. But, since, as Berlin believes, no final solution is in principle ever going to harmonise the different aims that human beings have, and since there are numerous incompatible, worthwhile ways of living (a view sometimes known as **pluralism**), a combination of negative and positive freedom is a precondition of a satisfactory life. Take away the guarantee of some basic negative freedoms for all adults, and the result will be misery for those whose aims in life do not conveniently harmonise with the dominant view in that society.

3.6 Berlin criticised: one concept of freedom?

I've already mentioned that the most important feature of Berlin's article for our purposes is his distinction between negative and positive concepts of freedom: freedom from constraint, and the freedom that results from self-mastery or self-realisation. Most

discussion of Berlin's article has also focused on this distinction. Now I want to consider a criticism of the distinction between two types of freedom.

The whole article rests on the assumption that we can make a meaningful distinction between negative and positive concepts of freedom. Gerald MacCallum challenged this view in an article, ‘Negative and Positive Freedom’, in which he claimed that there is just one concept of freedom, not two, and that the idea that there are two concepts introduces confusion about what is really at stake. MacCallum summarises his position on the distinction between negative and positive concepts of freedom:

> the distinction between them has never been made sufficiently clear, is based in part upon a serious confusion, and has drawn attention away from precisely what needs examining if the differences separating philosophers, ideologies, and social movements concerned with freedom are to be understood. The corrective advised is to regard freedom as always one and the same triadic relation, but recognise that various contending parties disagree with each other in what they understand to be the ranges of the term variables. To view the matter in this way is to release oneself from a prevalent but unrewarding concentration on ‘kinds’ of freedom, and to turn attention toward the truly important issues in this area of social and political philosophy.
>
> (MacCallum jnr, in Miller (1991), p. 100)

The single concept of freedom that MacCallum puts forward as a replacement for Berlin's two concepts is ‘triadic’. All this means is that it has three parts. The three parts are as follows: freedom is always freedom for someone; it is also freedom from some possible constraint; and it is freedom to do (or not do) something. MacCallum believes that in any discussion of freedom, we should be able to fill in the details for each of the three parts. When one of the parts seems to be missing this is simply because it is implicit in the context. So, for example, any discussion of freedom of speech will, implicitly or explicitly, refer to some person or persons who are or are not constrained to make some sort of public statement.

What MacCallum is doing is arguing that there is a simpler and more useful concept of freedom available than the two concepts set out by Berlin. This simpler concept embodies aspects of both the negative and the positive concepts of freedom described by Berlin. However, Berlin has responded to this criticism by pointing out that there are important cases in which freedom is at issue which cannot be fitted into this three part concept of freedom. Here is Berlin's response:

> It has been suggested that liberty is always a triadic relation: one can only seek to be free from X to do or be Y; hence ‘all liberty’ is at once negative and positive or, better still, neither… This seems to me an error. A man struggling against his chains or a people against enslavement need not consciously aim at any definite further state. A man need not know how he will use his freedom; he just wants to remove the yoke. So do classes and nations.
>
> (Berlin, op. cit., footnote, p. xliii)

Put simply, what Berlin has done here is to have provided several counterexamples to MacCallum's general claim that all discussions of freedom can be resolved into a single triadic concept of freedom with varying content. To MacCallum's claim that freedom must always include an explicit or implicit view about what it is freedom to do or be, Berlin has presented some cases in which this does not appear to be so. Any general claim, such as

one that begins ‘All… are…’ (e.g. all aardvarks have long tongues) can be refuted by a single counter-example (e.g. in this case, a short-tongued aardvark). If someone claims that all mammals live on land, you only need to cite the single counterexample of dolphins to make clear that the generalisation is false. Similarly, if someone claims that no one ever lived over the age of one hundred and twenty, you only need to produce evidence that one person has lived to be one hundred and twenty-one to refute their claim. (The word ‘refute’ means ‘demonstrate to be false’; it shouldn't be confused with the word ‘repudiate’ which simply means ‘deny’.) Counter-examples provide a powerful way of undermining a generalisation.

Activity 6: Generalisations refuted by counter-example

Which of the following pairs of statements consist of a generalisation followed by a refutation by counter-example?

1. No one has ever returned from the dead.
   No one will ever return from the dead.
2. All cats like eating tuna fish.
   My cat detests tuna fish and won't touch it.
3. All bachelors of arts have degrees.
   My aunt is a bachelor of arts.
4. No self-respecting intellectual would enjoy watching television ‘soap operas’.
   A.J. Ayer was a self-respecting intellectual and he enjoyed watching television ‘soap operas’.
5. Everyone who has written about freedom has maintained that there are at least two concepts of freedom.
   MacCallum has written about freedom maintaining that there is just one basic concept of freedom.

Compare your answers with those below before reading on.

(2), (4), and (5) consist of a generalisation followed by a counter-example.

If any of Berlin's examples are accurate descriptions of possible states of affairs, then it follows that he has refuted MacCallum's notion that all meaningful senses of freedom can be captured within a single triadic concept. It **does** seem reasonable to say that someone struggling for freedom may just seek to ‘remove the yoke’. Indeed this seems to be a basic sense in which we use the word ‘freedom’, one that is not captured by MacCallum's triadic concept.

Activity 7: Reading

When you have finished this course, try reading through the long extract from Berlin's ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. It concentrates on the distinction between negative and positive liberty and doesn't cover the issues raised in the second half of this course. Don't worry if you can't follow every point: Berlin refers to a wide range of thinkers in passing, most of whose work you probably won't know. Also, like many philosophers, he writes at quite an abstract level. However, much of this essay should already be familiar to you from the long quotations included in this course.

Click to open 'Two Concepts of Liberty'.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Course summary

‘Freedom’ can mean many different things; the word can have a powerful emotive force. We're concerned here with political freedom. Isaiah Berlin distinguished between a concept of negative freedom and a concept of positive freedom. Negative freedom is freedom from interference, it is a matter of the opportunities that lie open to you. Positive freedom is the capability of doing what you really want to do. Historically, according to Berlin, the concept of positive freedom has been used to justify various kinds of oppression. Berlin also believes that there is no ‘final solution’, no simple way of reconciling the different goals that different people have. Berlin's view, that there are two concepts of freedom, has been attacked by Gerald MacCallum who thinks there is only one concept. Berlin has provided several counter-examples to MacCallum's point.

4.2 Further reading

The complete text of Isaiah Berlin's essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ is contained in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969). This book also contains an essay on John Stuart Mill's theory of liberty. A wider-ranging selection of Berlin's essays is *The Proper Study of Mankind* (Pimlico, 1998). This also includes the full text of ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. The best commentary on Berlin's writings is *Isaiah Berlin* (Fontana, 1995) by John Gray. Although quite difficult in places, this book extracts the main philosophical themes from Berlin's work.

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