

Introduction: “Freedom” is universally praised and has many meanings. Berlin believes that two central meanings are answers to the questions (1) What is my range of free action? (2) What is the source of legitimate coercion?

1.) Negative Freedom (the absence of coercion)

Representatives: Classical liberals, John Locke, J. S. Mill, Benjamin Constant

- A classical liberal idea which defines liberty as the **absence of coercion**, and which could be summarized: **“The wider the range of non-interference, the greater my freedom.”**
- A certain **minimum range of personal freedom** is required in order to pursue the human good. Thus, there should be a divide between the public and private spheres.
- Classical liberal thinkers generally agree that there should be **some limits to freedom, in the interests of other values**, and to avoid the powerful depriving the weak of their own freedom. Hobbes believed in greater limits, Locke and J. S. Mill in more minimal limits.
- Why was liberty important to J. S. Mill? Because he wanted people to express “spontaneity, genius, energy and mental courage,” whether through “pagan self-assertion” or “Christian self-abnegation,” instead of being subsumed by “collective mediocrity.” In short, it is an individualistic ideal.
- IB critiques Mill. He says Mill is conflating two ideas: (1) Coercion is bad, and (2) People should develop an independent, energetic personality. In fact, there is no necessary connection. Most importantly, IB says that Mill’s ideals could be compatible with despotism, as long as the despot gave you individual freedom. **There is no necessary connection between Mill’s liberty and self-rule.** This is the major difference between Negative and Positive Liberty.

2.) Positive Freedom (self-rule or self-mastery)

- This idea of liberty could be summarized as **“being your own master.”** It entails being a thinking, active, and responsible being.
- How does this conflict with Negative Freedom? Because we often distinguish between our **“real or higher selves”** (the rational or noble part of us) and our **“lower selves,”** which are enslaved by passions, irrationality, and ignorance.
- It is easy to identify the “real self” with an **exterior reality—a social whole, a state, a church, the collective will, etc.**, and thus to justify coercion. But for IB, to claim that you are acting on behalf of someone else’s “real self” is a “monstrous impersonation.”
- IB wants to be clear: coercing other people for their own good *may* be justified in certain cases, but that does *not* make it any less coercion!

A. “Retreat to the Inner Citadel” (self-mastery through self-abnegation)

Representatives: Ascetics, Stoics, Buddhists, Kant, (Rousseau?)

- One way to achieve self-mastery is to reduce your own desires—to escape from unrealistic or unrealizable desires. This is the approach of ascetics, stoics, and Buddhists.
- For Kant, freedom is not following your desires, but controlling them. The individual should strive to attain rationality, overcoming irrationality. Rousseau: Freedom is “obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves.” (autonomy = auto [self] + nomos [law])
- IB: Ascetic self-denial may be good, but it is not freedom.

B. “Self-realization” (liberation through reason)

Representatives: Plato’s Republic, Herder, Hegel, Marx, Auguste Comte, “Sarastro” from The Magic Flute, Enlightened Despotism, (Rousseau?)

- “The only true method of attaining freedom is by the use of critical reason, the understanding of what is necessary.” Illusion and ignorance make you unfree, learning the truth makes you free. In short, **virtue = knowledge = freedom.**

- Many believed that, as in the natural sciences, there was **one single “scientific” answer to moral and political questions**. Thinkers like Herder, Hegel, and Marx developed their own ideas about what these “scientific laws” were.
- To disagree with these “necessary” laws would be irrational or ignorant. Thus, **all conflict arises from the clash of reason with the irrational**.
- Similarly, then a just social order must also in principle be discoverable. Only irrationality prevents people from recognizing it. “There can in principle be only one correct way of life; the wise lead it spontaneously, that is why they are called wise.”
- **How to make irrational people rational?** Fichte believed in a coercive type of education: “You will later recognize the reasons for what I am doing now.” If we do not allow free thinking in Chemistry or Biology, why allow it in morals or politics? This is not tyranny, but liberation (from ignorance, tradition, etc.) Note that this is the exact opposite of Kant’s idea of autonomy (making laws for yourself).
- IB points out that **this idea of freedom leads to “despotism, albeit by the wisest,”** and suggests that the “virtue = knowledge = freedom” view, though influential in Western thought, is completely wrong.

The Search for Status (collective self-direction)

Representatives: Nationalism, anti-colonialism, class struggle

- Here IB discusses an idea that he thinks is *related to freedom*, but *distinct from it*.
- An individual’s identity is intelligible only in terms of his/her social network. As individuals, **we crave recognition** from our peers.
- Similarly, **groups also desire “recognition as an independent source of human activity, as an entity with a will of its own.”** We want to be ruled by “people like us.”
- This desire for agency is **not the same thing as negative freedom**; IB compares it to what Mill called “pagan self-assertion.” He thinks we don’t have a good name for it.
- IB: This is a very human desire; elitist liberals like Mill should not ignore it.

Liberty and Sovereignty

- Based on the above distinctions, IB agrees with Mill and Constant that **liberty is not the same thing as democracy or popular sovereignty**.
- The transfer of sovereignty from one group to another does not necessarily increase freedom. The important issue is not who has authority, but how much authority. “It is not against the arm that one must rail, but against the weapon.”
- IB argues that **in order to defend some minimum amount of negative liberty, there must be absolute limits on authority**, whether through religion, human rights, natural law, etc.

The One and the Many (in which IB gives his own opinions and draws conclusions)

- IB thinks that the belief that “all the positive values must be compatible” (monism) is wrong and dangerous. **“The belief that some single formula can in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realized is demonstrably false.”** In contrast, **“human goals are many, not all of them commensurable”** (pluralism).
- In fact, there will always be “the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy.” “The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.” Thus, we will always need freedom, which is **“an end in itself.”**
- He admits that **individual freedom is “not the sole, or even the dominant criterion of social action.”** Freedom is limited based on “our moral, religious, intellectual, economic, and aesthetic values,” in short, “our vision of what constitutes a fulfilled human life.”
- IB believes that we will never reach a final consensus on the ends of life; although monism is powerful both intellectually and emotionally, he favors **Pluralism and Negative Freedom, “a truer and more humane ideal.”** Ultimately he seems to suggest that monism is the result of an immature craving for certainty. ♦