

## **Force, liberty and the consequences thereof**

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In this paper, I shall attempt first to illustrate the positive and negative concepts of liberty; second, imagine the consequences of the imposition of either form of liberty; third, conclude whether freedom implemented by force is viable in these circumstances. Finally, I will examine any assumptions made in the discussion and present alternative bases for further discussion.

Over the many years of philosophical thought, liberty has been a contentious debate between various schools of thought: from Locke's 'natural laws' to Nietzsche's conquest of freedom. In the 20th century, Isaiah Berlin broadly classified these views on liberty into positive and negative liberty. (Harris & Berlin, 2002, 166) We can understand the differences between the two through the subtle semantic differences in their connotations: the 'freedom *from*' and the 'freedom *to*.'

Negative liberty entails the *freedom from interference* in our actions: one is the supreme authority to judge the prudence of their actions. (Sriranjani, 2008, 48) Further, the state has a limited role as it cannot decide the 'ideal' actions for the individual and must be tolerant of any actions the individual may commit. Mill contended that the state might only curtail an individual's liberty if the individual's act harms another person; it violates the law of nature. (Sriranjani, 2008, 43) Mill's view is not a radical view of negative liberty; it still imposes *some* constraints on the individual; however, he is often considered a proponent of the negative outlook on liberty. (Carter, 2003)

Positive liberty speaks about one's *freedom to* do as one pleases, rooted in the presumed desire of the individual to be their own master. (Harris & Berlin, 2002, 167) We may call this assumption into question, why should one want to be their own master? If they should be, does that mean everyone has to desire to be their own master necessarily? If we take the assumption at its face value, one can only be liberated by attaining self-mastery: control of the higher, rational self over the lower, impulsive, passionate self. Unlike negative liberty, positive liberty is not opposed to the idea of laws and rules so long as they direct the individual toward a rational end. (Sriranjani, 2008, 50)

A helpful example to understand the differences is stated as follows: imagine you have to write a philosophy paper that is critical for your grade and, thus, in some part, for your overall success. You have cleared out your schedule for the day and are seated at your table with plenty of time to complete the paper. There are no obstacles to your work; thus, you are entirely free from the negative view of liberty. Now, you get the notification that the latest episode of your favorite show has just been released. The *rational self* knows that completing the paper is more pertinent than the episode; however, you feel compelled to watch the show instead of working on your paper. Are you still free? Positive liberty argues for the negative and says that liberty is actualized through self-mastery over our '*lower*' selves and that we may even be compelled by an authority to finish the paper as it directs us towards a rational end.

Now that we have established firm ideas of the concepts of positive and negative liberty, we contend with the question: is it right to force people to be free? Once we establish what 'force' entails, we can answer the question via two viewpoints, that of positive and negative liberty. In my analysis, I shall assume this 'force' to be commensurate and aligned with the view of liberty. However, this may not be the case, and we may assert other assumptions.

It appears paradoxical to force negative liberty; how can we possibly enforce the *lack* of restrictions? In our best attempt at the same, we can imagine a radical implementation of negative freedom, wherein no laws, rules, or regulations exist. The extreme nature of this view would call into question the purported social contract that forms the basis of societies. The outcome of this implementation would be a function of the moral system (if any) followed by society. Society may continue to function as usual; it may collapse into the 'natural state' as imagined by Locke or Hobbes, or it may degenerate into anarchy, as seen by Kropotkin. (Kropotkin, 1886)

Positive liberty is open to the idea of an individual being led by law or an elite and contends that as long as these leading forces work towards rational ends, they are justified. The dangers of authoritarianism under this view can be seen in the history of the twentieth century. Even Berlin himself was shocked that the noble ideal of freedom as self-mastery or self-realization had been

twisted and distorted by the totalitarian dictators of the twentieth century as justification for their actions.

In conclusion, one cannot 'force people to be free' without encountering the dangerous possibilities discussed above. The enforcement of negative liberty may collapse society, and that of positive liberty may establish a dictatorial regime, which is no liberty at all.

### References

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