

Berlin on Liberty

MARIO RICCIARDI

What makes a contemporary classic? The answer is seldom uncontroversial. Popularity, originality, depth—each of these is proffered in turn as the defining property of this elusive class of artefacts. Disagreement is just as great among the experts: each connoisseur has his own favourite classic. So it might come as a surprise that in the field of political philosophy few would deny classic status to ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (TCL). Isaiah Berlin’s essay, originally a lecture given in Oxford in 1958, is widely recognised in the field as one of the outstanding achievements of twentieth-century political thought, almost everybody’s choice at or near the top of the list for an ideal anthology of contemporary political philosophy.

Part of the explanation for this amazing popularity, which spreads far beyond those sympathetic to Berlin’s political outlook, may be found in its distinctive ‘voice’.¹ In sharp contrast to the dominant tendency of the age, which conceives the academic author as an impersonal agency whose style, tastes and idiosyn-

1. Arthur C. Danto has aptly characterised this feature of those he calls ‘star-philosophers’. They ‘have pretty distinct voices, possibly in consequence of the fact that so much of what they have written has been composed to be read before audiences, and hence is filled with devices of a kind calculated to hold an audience: turns of phrase, ingenuity of examples, sparks of wit, and an aura of presumed intimacy between speaker and hearer’ (1999, 228).

crasies are better excluded from the written page, Berlin features prominently in his essay. Quite literally, he ‘speaks his mind’. The result is somewhat less transparent than the best contemporary philosophical prose, as exemplified by authors such as John Rawls or Thomas Nagel, but has an unmatched capacity to capture the reader’s attention. We find ourselves thrown into the middle of an intellectual battlefield which Berlin brings to life with the same realism that one finds in Paolo Uccello’s fresco *The Battle of San Romano*. We can almost hear the clash of different understandings of liberty, feel ‘the power of ideas’ as they take hold of our imagination and feeling (L 167).

To those familiar with the golden period of Oxford philosophy, Berlin’s personal approach is not a surprise. One finds the same quality in the writings of all the major authors who belong to the generation and intellectual environment notoriously dubbed ‘our age’ by Maurice Bowra (Annan 1990). The same highly personal tone is present in the writings of philosophers otherwise as diverse as J. L. Austin, Stuart Hampshire and Iris Murdoch. To the contemporary reader, trained in the strictures imposed on academic writing by the practice of blind refereeing, the carefree attitude these authors had to footnotes, bibliographic references and allusions to the ideas of other people (often identified just by surname) is sometimes maddening, but preserves the taste of a conversation.² This is a style of philosophical writing that bears the marks of philosophy’s oral, face-to-face origins.

Reading TCL, one should always remember that the essay was conceived as a lecture, that it is based on earlier lectures, and that even in its final, revised, form, it should be thought of as addressed to a lay audience.³ These features account for the complexity of the text, which covers more ground than the title announces, and for the apparent inconclusiveness of some of the arguments. On issues such as coercion or freedom of the will Berlin confines himself to general remarks, sailing at a safe distance from the shallow waters in which more analytically minded authors frequently find themselves stranded. It is clear that his aim is not analysis as such, but rather to give his public a broad view of the intellectual landscape.

In the lecture Berlin draws an intellectual map, charting the terrain with its slopes and asperities, tracing the paths followed by different authors and political movements. The starting point is the distinction between negative and positive liberty—a distinction that, as Berlin points out, is not meant to be exhaustive of the different senses in which ‘this protean word’ has been used in the history of mankind (L 168). Next, he assesses different interpretations of ‘positive liberty’,

2. According to Danto, this contrasts sharply with the ‘bottom-line view’ of philosophy that underlies blind reviewing (1999, 241).

3. Berlin’s lecture is a distillation of material from two previous sets of lectures, now published as FIB and PIRA.

the implications of which can gradually lead to results that turn out to be inimical to the enjoyment of freedom in the negative sense. This is the peculiar ‘inversion’ in the meaning of ‘liberty’ which Berlin denounces in the lecture because it leads to an understanding of the political community that is the very opposite of a liberal society (IBLP 68–71). The remainder of the lecture deals with other aspects of freedom that, though grounded in its ordinary use, are extensions of its core meaning to different areas of experience. In the final part Berlin puts forward an early version of his idea of pluralism, and shows its critical connection to liberalism and to the idea of a political regime that recognises an area of non-interference with the activities of its subjects. As this highly compressed summary suggests, it is only an examination of the map as a whole that can make sense of Berlin’s agenda.

Although it is ostensibly about a conceptual distinction, Berlin’s essay is relatively sketchy when it comes to analytical fine tuning. Nevertheless, even a superficial glance at the current literature on freedom reveals Berlin’s remarkable originality. He touches on several points that are still at the forefront of the debate. These aspects of Berlin’s approach are worth mentioning because they help the newcomer to understand an otherwise puzzling feature of Berlin’s attitude to the debate that took its lead from TCL. With few exceptions, to be found in his Introduction to ‘Five Essays on Liberty’ (in L), Berlin did not reply to the criticisms of his own formulation and defence of the distinction between negative and positive liberty. As time passed, a huge number of articles dealt with his treatment of freedom, but the author himself took a rather Olympian attitude towards the debate, emerging from his self-imposed discretion only once, to issue a short reply to an article by David West.⁴ Such self-restraint is unusual, even in a writer who notoriously entertained serious doubts about the value of his own philosophical work.

There is, of course, an easy explanation, supported by Berlin’s own statement that he ‘left philosophy for the field of the history of ideas’ (CC vii–viii). One might argue that Berlin was not interested in the niceties of the analytical debate because he conceived of them as belonging to philosophy, an intellectual activity in which he no longer regarded himself as engaged by the time the debate reached its height. The fine-grained analyses of the likes of Felix E. Oppenheim, J. P. Day or Hillel Steiner⁵ are as far from the history of ideas as one can imagine. Hence the lack of interest, and the silence.

Despite the authority that Berlin himself has lent to such an explanation, there is a better account of his attitude towards the analytic treatment of

4. West 1993. Berlin’s reply (1993b) is in the same issue of the journal.

5. Oppenheim 1961; Day 1970; Steiner 1975.

freedom, which sheds light on TCL as a whole. This is suggested by the difference between the first reactions to TCL and the subsequent debate. Earlier commentators such as Richard Wollheim and Gerald MacCallum raised specific points about Berlin's presentation and defence of the distinction between negative and positive liberty that he (quite reasonably) felt under an obligation to address, irrespective of their importance for his own intellectual agenda, but most later contributions mention the essay without engaging in any sustained discussion or criticism of the overall argument. With the sole exception of a footnote in which Berlin deals with the problem of the measurement of freedom, the essay is treated as a classic, if somewhat superseded, statement of a conceptual distinction still relevant to the contemporary debate. Very little attention is devoted to the overall structure of the text and to its different strands of argument. It is almost as if what follows the introduction and discussion of the distinction—more than half of the essay—was just a very long footnote, an afterthought. If, as I suggest, Berlin had an overall aim, he might be excused for not having felt the need to engage in this new phase of the debate. It is not the philosophical character and style of the subsequent discussion that explains Berlin's silence, but rather its irrelevance to his own intellectual agenda. His broader purpose, I believe, is to restate the importance and methods of political philosophy.

OVERTURE: THE RESILIENCE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

A brief survey of the structure of the essay illustrates my claim. As is customary with inaugural lectures, the original version of TCL included an 'overture' whose aim was to show the general relevance of the topic and to pay the author's respects to the previous holder of the chair. Berlin discharged his duties towards his predecessor as Chichele Professor with grace, acknowledging G. D. H. Cole's multiple talents as teacher, thinker, writer and political activist. This latter, occasional, part of the text was omitted when the essay was published in its final form in 1998 and in 2002 (PSM, L). The remainder of the 'overture' reads like a short manifesto for Berlin's understanding of his mission as Professor of Social and Political Theory. It contains, in compressed form, a defence of the relevance of political philosophy and a statement of method for the discipline, which together provide a preface to the essay. Berlin warns the reader against the tendency to underestimate 'the power of ideas'. It is likely that he had two different targets in mind in issuing such a warning: on the one hand, historical materialism, with its devaluation of ideas and culture—the superstructure—as contrasted with the material conditions of society—the structure; on the other, logical positivism,

with its dismissive attitude towards moral and political concepts. Today the reader might find such a coupling odd, but Berlin persuasively pointed out a remarkable similarity in their practical consequences in the field of political philosophy:

To neglect the field of political thought, because its unstable subject-matter, with its blurred edges, is not to be caught by the fixed concepts, abstract models and fine instruments suitable to logic or linguistic analysis—to demand a unity of method in philosophy and reject whatever the method cannot successfully manage—is merely to allow oneself to remain at the mercy of primitive and uncriticised political beliefs. It is only a very vulgar historical materialism that denies the power of ideas, and says that ideals are mere material interests in disguise. (L 167–8)

Seeing through differences in style and form of argument, Berlin recognised a common trend in two of the most powerful intellectual movements of the age. The connection becomes clearer if one considers the attitude prevalent at the time among logical positivists. A. J. Ayer comes most naturally to mind, but perhaps the writings of Margaret Macdonald illustrate this attitude better. She was a student and teacher at Bedford College, London, and attended Wittgenstein's lectures in the 1930s. A pioneer in a world that was still male-dominated, she wrote several papers on political and legal philosophy which were widely read in the 1950s, as is shown by the fact that two of them were included in a famous anthology edited by Antony Flew (1951). Almost completely forgotten now—she died in 1956—Macdonald was a bold writer and thinker whose approach to political language was marked by complete scepticism towards its cognitive content. She subscribed to a version of the subjectivist theory of value, popular among logical positivists, which held that human choice is the only source of value.⁶ Dealing with the problem of the foundation of political obligation, she wrote that there is 'an indefinite set of vaguely shifting criteria, differing for different times and circumstances' (1951, 185–6). Linked to a determinist explanation of preferences, this theory of political obligation was remarkably close to the thoroughgoing historicism of some of the Marxist thinkers of the time. Political judgement is reduced to the selection of the most efficient means to achieve ends chosen on ideological grounds. The consequences for political philosophy were momentous. According to Macdonald, 'The value of the political theorists [...] is not in the general information they give about the basis of political obligation but in their skill in emphasising at a critical moment a criterion which is tending to

6. According to Macdonald, 'value utterances are more like records of *decisions* than propositions' (1956, 49).

be overlooked or denied' (1951, 186)—an ancillary, almost technical role, whose aim seems to be persuasion rather than knowledge.⁷

Given such premisses, it is not surprising that, two years before the publication of Berlin's essay, Peter Laslett announced the violent death of political philosophy, naming logical positivism as the culprit (1956, vii–ix). Laslett's denunciation is still quoted today as evidence of attitudes in the 1950s, but it was always far-fetched. A survey of what was published and taught in Britain at the time shows that in the late 1950s political philosophy was still alive and well. Although it was more marginal in the philosophical community than it was up to the early 1940s (see O'Sullivan 2004, 20–40), its value was not negligible—not at least if thinkers such as Michael Oakeshott, John Plamenatz or J. D. Mabbott qualify (as seems reasonable) as political philosophers of outstanding ability. Nevertheless, Laslett's announcement is evidence of a widespread prejudice, with which Berlin meant to take issue in his lecture. Berlin's bellicose attitude is not simply the natural reaction of somebody who has just been elected to a chair in political theory and is eager to show that his own calling is not devoid of interest for the academic community and the general public. The methodological remarks at the beginning of the essay should be read as the outcome of his evolution as a thinker, and were put forward as serious arguments against the devaluation of political philosophy. In order to understand, and not merely explain away, political disagreement, one should put words, concepts and deeds in their proper context. This context, as the content and structure of the essay show, has to be historical. Otherwise, as Berlin says, 'our own attitudes and activities are likely to remain obscure to us'. To make sense of political problems, we should 'understand the dominant issues of our own world' (L 168). The phrasing is not accidental. The shallow image of political theorists as caretakers of ideologies is swept aside to be replaced with the traditional idea of philosophy as self-understanding, conjugated in the historical mood.⁸

Berlin recognises the importance of words and their meanings for the understanding of politics, but disagrees with the selective attitude of most of his contemporaries towards the proper starting point for conceptual investigations. He suggests that 'the best among them look with disdain upon a field in which radical discoveries are less likely to be made, and talent for minute analysis is less likely to be rewarded' (L 167). The adjective 'minute' is interestingly ambivalent. For people such as Austin and his followers it had a positive resonance, pointing towards the careful and patient fieldwork that they regarded as an essential part of a philosophical analysis of language; but for Berlin it clearly had a more critical

7. Berlin elaborates his criticisms of this way of conceiving political philosophy in 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in CC, 152–3, 156.

8. This feature of Berlin's treatment of freedom went unnoticed, surprisingly, in Skinner 1984.

connotation. There may be an allusion to R. G. Collingwood's sharp criticism of those he called 'minute philosophers' (1939, 15–21). These were people such as H. A. Prichard and H. W. B. Joseph, who, under the influence of their teacher and mentor John Cook Wilson, pioneered the kind of painstaking analysis of ordinary language commonly associated with Austin and his school.

Berlin was a close friend and associate of Austin, and had a leading role in shaping the activity and intellectual agenda of what he himself later called 'Oxford Philosophy' (PI 130–45). Nevertheless, by the time he delivered his inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor he was completely out of tune with the direction in which Oxford Philosophy was heading. His published letters show that even in the early 1930s he was critical of 'the futility of the wrangles indulged in by [his] colleagues, young especially'. Hence the determination to read 'a lot of Hegel, Marx, Engels & the Russians in order to climb out into a different even if not wider universe' (L1 43). A careful examination of Berlin's early philosophical writings bears witness to such an attitude. His critique of verificationism, and his defence of the autonomy and significance of areas of ordinary language, such as metaphor, that were looked on with suspicion by most of his Oxford contemporaries, are evidence of a growing dissatisfaction with their way of doing philosophy.

There is a continuity between Berlin's defence of a pluralistic approach in the philosophy of language and his account of the different uses of the word 'liberty' (CC 56–80). The meaning of this word is 'so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist' (L 168). Here, again, the choice of words is not accidental. The use of 'porous' is likely to be an allusion to Friedrich Waismann's thesis on the 'porosity' of ordinary language (1945, 41–5; 1946, 95–7). According to Waismann, 'porosity' should be distinguished from 'vagueness'. Vagueness can be reduced by sharpening definition, but porosity is an inherent feature of concepts, not just a matter of how they are used in ordinary parlance. Our efforts to discipline language, to reduce it to a precise instrument, are bound to be frustrated by this characteristic of the words we use. As the epithet 'porous' suggests, Waismann alludes to a disposition to absorb and retain matter that should properly be regarded as external to the nature of the item in question. Like sponges, our words carry with them contents that exceed their core meaning. Hence 'every definition stretches into an open horizon' (1944, 44). Waismann's highly personal approach encouraged the kind of large-scale account of areas of experience and thought that people such as Austin were likely to consider wild, almost charlatanesque, flights of the imagination.

CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

Berlin's lecture is ostensibly about 'two concepts' of liberty, but very little attention has been devoted to what exactly he meant by 'concept'. A survey of the text shows that the answer to this question cannot be taken for granted. Berlin employs, somewhat promiscuously, different words and expressions that are not obviously synonymous. He talks about 'political words and notions', 'meaning', and the 'sense of the word'. What is clear is that he thinks that the same word can be used in different ways and that, among these different uses, some have sufficient stability to be regarded as expressing concepts (or 'conceptions' or 'notions': Berlin seems to use such terms interchangeably). In the case of 'liberty' (or 'freedom'—Berlin treats the two as synonymous) the very same word expresses at least two different concepts, 'negative' and 'positive'. In our post-Fregean era such liberality in the choice of terminology might appear a sign of sloppy thinking, but it was not necessarily so at the time Berlin wrote his lecture. Philosophers of outstanding distinction such as Gilbert Ryle and H. L. A. Hart employed the word 'concept' with the same liberality to investigate very large areas of experience. Readers of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) or Hart's *The Concept of Law* (1961) who open these books in search of something like a clear-cut definition, a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the use of a word, will be severely disappointed. They will find instead a careful analysis of the uses of the words 'mind' or 'law', and of several other words connected with them in different ways. In addition, both books contain an impressive array of interrelated philosophical arguments and explanations concerning the different things and events about which all these words are used in ordinary language. For Berlin's contemporaries, to write a book or a paper on 'the concept of X' was to put forward a philosophical account of X.

Nevertheless, in Berlin's writings there are traces of a general account of concepts that is worth examining, given its importance for the proper understanding of TCL. Berlin himself gave a hint of what he meant by 'concept' in a conversation with Bryan Magee, where he described concepts as 'the structural units of our thinking'. The two concepts of liberty examined in the lecture are indeed something like structural units in so far as they are the items around which different debates and political disagreements seem to cluster. Berlin's conversation with Magee is interesting also for the qualification that immediately follows this characterisation of concepts. According to Berlin, 'we make use in our thinking not only of structural units but also of structures'. These structures

are often called 'models'. For example, when talking about society some people will think of it as a sort of machine, put together by man to accomplish certain

tasks, in which all the various moving parts connect up with each other in certain ways. But others will think of it as a sort of organism, something that grows like a living thing, in the way an oak tree develops out of an acorn. Now whether you think of society as a sort of machine or as a sort of organism will have enormous practical consequences, because—depending on which of these models is dominating your thinking—you will derive significantly different conclusions and attitudes regarding government, politics and social questions, not least regarding the relationships of the individual to society. You will also have a different attitude towards the past, and to the various ways in which change can come about. (Magee 1978, 38)

Berlin's conversation with Magee was recorded for the BBC in the mid-1970s. He had already given a more detailed account of 'models' or 'paradigms' in two essays published in the early 1960s, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' and 'The Purpose of Philosophy' (both in CC). Here the 'large-scale' items of our intellectual endowment are distinguished from 'categories'—'central features of our experience that are invariant and omnipresent, or at least much less variable than the vast variety of its empirical characteristics' (CC 165). According to Berlin, freedom is one of the basic categories in terms of which we conceive and study man and society. He does not use the word 'concept' very much in these earlier methodological reflections, but it does not seem unreasonable to think that concepts are the historical building-blocks out of which models or paradigms are composed. One might say that the two concepts examined in the lecture are among the interpretations of the basic category of freedom that emerge from what Oakeshott calls 'the conversation of mankind'.⁹ In the light of such evidence, and if my account of its significance is correct, the thesis that in 1958 Berlin was doing 'harmless' history of ideas instead of philosophy should be rejected. Many years after his supposed 'retirement' from the philosophical profession, Berlin articulated and defended, in his conversation with Magee, the same approach he had adopted in TCL.

In the study of the external world, what counts as a category seems to be determined by invariable, though metaphysically contingent, properties of human beings, but when we come to the study of society and politics, categories appear more liable to change. This might happen as the result of a slow, almost imperceptible, shift in the way people talk and think, or as the outcome of radical, revolutionary, subversions of perspective. The publication of the two texts¹⁰ from which TCL was distilled has sharpened our understanding of the lecture,

9. Oakeshott 1962.

10. FIB, for all its many differences from PIRA, is essentially a re-presentation of parts of the same body of material.

showing the crucial background role that the ‘romantic revolution’ and its consequences play in the confrontation between negative and positive accounts of freedom. Berlin’s decision to introduce the two concepts as developed out of the possible answers to two different questions is designed to bring to light this ‘dramatic’ dimension of the philosophical and ideological approach to freedom. The passage is worth quoting in full:

The first of these political senses of freedom or liberty [...], which (following much precedent) I shall call the ‘negative’ sense, is involved in the answer to the 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?’ The second, which I shall call the ‘positive’ sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?’ (L 169)

Some commentators have pointed out that Berlin’s deployment of interrogatives to elucidate what is involved in, or presupposed by, the use of a concept bears a striking resemblance to the role that ‘the logic of question and answer’ plays in Collingwood’s search for ‘absolute presuppositions’.¹¹ The comparison is indeed suggestive, and finds further backing in Berlin’s Prologue to PIRA, where the intellectual debt to Collingwood is explicitly acknowledged (13). In any event, this interpretation of Berlin’s method reinforces the sense in which TCL sets out a role for contemporary political theory within the broader field of philosophy.

According to Berlin, models and paradigms shape the way people think and talk in a way that can be, and at the ordinary level is very likely to be, unconscious (CC 154). They exercise a hold on the imagination mainly through metaphor (CC 158). The task of philosophy is to attend to such modes of expression so as to sharpen our awareness of their presuppositions. Since this kind of investigation deals with assumptions that have slowly taken their current form with the passing of generations, its method should be alert to the peculiarities of historical analysis. Of paramount importance among these is a sensitivity to the relative instability of models and paradigms, to the constant strain to which they are subject under the pressure of experience, and to their consequent susceptibility to change (CC 9–11).¹² Philosophical understanding is something that should not be taken for granted, once and for all.

These features of Berlin’s method explain an otherwise puzzling peculiarity of TCL that has frequently been misunderstood. Many commentators have com-

11. The first to point out such a similarity was Bernard Williams (CC xv–xvii). Recently, the matter has been investigated further in Skagestad 2005.

12. CC 9–11. See Collingwood 1940, 48 note, 350–5.

plained about the supposed lack of rigour in the analysis of negative and positive liberty. But such a criticism ought to be seen as misplaced once one has understood that Berlin is not merely analysing the logical connections between different uses of a word. When, for example, he warns that some interpretations of positive liberty can lead to conclusions incompatible with freedom understood in the more basic, negative, sense, his thesis should not be read as if it were the discovery of a logical possibility. A statement about positive liberty does not 'entail' any such consequences (L 198). It is the play of political imagination, the 'power of ideas', that can lead to such conclusions.¹³ This also explains why some of the analytical criticisms of the lecture are fundamentally wrongheaded. They fail to take seriously Berlin's overall undertaking on its own terms, which are basically those of Collingwood.

This objection certainly applies to Gerald MacCallum, possibly the most influential of the early critics of TCL. According to MacCallum there is just one concept of freedom, since every statement about liberty can be reduced, by means of analysis, to the following formula: an agent, *x*, is free from 'preventing conditions', *y*, to do something (or to become something), *z*. By 'preventing conditions' MacCallum means 'constraints', 'restrictions', 'interferences' and 'barriers'. In this way, controversies concerning the definition of 'freedom' can be restated as disagreements over the interpretation of the three variables (agents, restrictions and actions or modes of being)—for example, over whether restrictions are natural or social, whether agents are individual or collective (MacCallum 1967). The success of MacCallum's definition is due in great part to John Rawls, who uses it in the formulation of his principles of justice (1971, 202). But despite its clarity and usefulness, MacCallum's formula fails to capture all the shades of meaning of 'liberty'. Most notably, it obliterates the opposition between the two concepts of freedom that Berlin meant to clarify.¹⁴ This, of course, is not an objection to the adoption of a 'triadic' definition of 'freedom' when it suits one's needs. But it is a crucial consideration in assessing the merit of MacCallum's criticisms of Berlin's essay. MacCallum's formula may still be valid for the category of freedom, despite failing to convey the contrasts between the different shades of meaning of the historical concepts of liberty. If Berlin's aim

13. Berlin himself clarified his position by saying that, when he wrote the lecture, he saw the idea of 'inner' or 'real' freedom characteristic of the positive account of liberty as a metaphor, although he did not emphasise the point. Political freedom is 'an altogether different matter, and directly concerned with coercion, whatever its relation to the impregnable life of reason' (1993b, 297).

14. It is surprising that Berlin's rather half-hearted reply to MacCallum does not point this out. Berlin instead confines himself to minor observations on what is or is not the case when persons or peoples struggle against their chains or enslavement (L 36).

was to bring to light these shades of meaning he was right to reject MacCallum's criticism: he and MacCallum were working at different levels of abstraction.

NEGATIVE LIBERTY: DESIRES AND MEASUREMENT

Berlin introduces the notion of negative liberty by pointing out that, in ordinary discourse, people are said to be free 'to the degree to which no man or body of man interferes' with their activity. Hence political liberty, is 'simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others'. What counts as obstruction is explained as follows: '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' (L 169). This, however, is a revision of the original text of the lecture. In the first version, political liberty was characterised as not being prevented from doing what one wants to do (1958, 7). As was pointed out by Richard Wollheim, liberty or the absence of it are in this way dependent on desire. This would lead to the counterintuitive result that if somebody has no desire to do what he is prevented from doing, he is nevertheless not unfree (Wollheim 1959, ??). So a perfectly contented slave would turn out to enjoy perfect freedom.

In *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), Berlin recognises the error and the text of TCL is modified accordingly. In the introduction he elaborates on the relation between liberty and desire, referring to the 'Stoic' view of freedom, according to which freedom consists in consciously adjusting one's desires to what it is possible to achieve. The 'discipline of desire' of the desert fathers, the 'contented slave', and what in contemporary economics are called 'adaptive preferences' are all instances of this psychological device. Berlin recognises that allowing freedom to be dependent on desire would rule out a non-subjective criterion of political liberty. Being free or unfree would become a matter of feeling oneself to be so. This would render meaningless any criticism of a political regime for suppressing liberty, so long as its subjects were psychologically adapted to their condition. The relevance of this point to understanding Berlin's liberalism has seldom been underlined, but is nevertheless of the utmost importance. It is clear from his reaction to Wollheim's criticisms, and also to those of Macfarlane (1966), that Berlin is determined to preserve freedom, or the lack of it, as a viable standard for the evaluation of a political regime. If the presence or absence of liberty in a given situation were a matter of perception, such a goal would be unattainable.

Being negatively free or unfree, then, is for Berlin a matter of fact. This fits with a plausible interpretation of a large class of quantitative statements and judgements, in political theory as well as in ordinary discourse. The most impor-

tant of these are comparative. One might say, for example, that John has more freedom than Paul, or that the average Afghan citizen has less freedom than the average British subject. Of course, such comparisons, if taken literally, need a unit or a standard of measurement.¹⁵ Berlin was aware of the relevance of this issue for a theory of negative liberty, and proposed his own account of the measure of freedom in a long footnote to the text of *TCL*. He enumerates five aspects of freedom that are relevant for its measurement:

The extent of my freedom seems to depend on (*a*) how many possibilities are open to me (although the method of counting these can never be more than impressionistic; possibilities of action are not discrete entities like apples, which can be exhaustively enumerated); (*b*) how easy or difficult each of these possibilities is to actualise; (*c*) how important in my plan of life, given my character and circumstances, these possibilities are when compared with each other; (*d*) how far they are closed and opened by deliberate human acts; (*e*) what value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives, puts on these various possibilities. (L 177, note 1)

This statement has raised a heated controversy in the literature.¹⁶ One thing strikes the reader immediately: Berlin's account brings together dimensions of freedom of different sorts. The number of possible actions open to one (*a*) and their relative difficulty (*b*) are clearly quantitative standards that, at least in principle, could be expressed mathematically; the importance (*c*) or value (*e*) of such actions are more aptly classified as qualities. Dimension (*d*), on the other hand, concerns a prerequisite for the application of the concept of freedom rather than a standard of measurement. The heterogeneity of the items in this list has given rise to the criticism that Berlin is aggregating incommensurables. The remainder of the footnote shows that he was aware of this objection, but his response to it is tentative, and far from clear. He says that all these magnitudes must be integrated, 'and a conclusion, necessarily never precise, or indisputable, drawn from this process', and then qualifies this by saying that 'It may well be that there are many incommensurable kinds and degrees of freedom, and that they cannot be drawn up on any single scale of magnitude.' He seems thereby to deny the possibility of aggregative comparative judgements, while granting that of simple comparative ones. The footnote ends with what sounds like a compromise: 'the vagueness of the concepts, and the multiplicity of the criteria involved, are attributes of the

15. This view is not shared by all liberals. However, those who reject it admit that its rejection implies the rejection of the idea of liberty as a fundamental value. See Dworkin 1977, 270.

16. For a survey of the debate, see Carter 1999.

subject-matter itself, not of our imperfect methods of measurement, or of incapacity for precise thought'. As it stands, this compromise is far from persuasive, because it fails to address the objection that it was meant to overcome, and, therefore, to fulfil the requirement that negative freedom should provide an independent standard of evaluation.

NEGATIVE LIBERTY VERSUS ABILITY AND SELF-GOVERNMENT

The success of Berlin's essay depends in good part on the success of the distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' freedom. As we have seen, for Berlin, negative freedom has to do with the space within which a person can be or do certain things without interference, whereas positive freedom concerns who governs—that is, who or what determines that a person does something or pursues a certain project. In the debate following the publication of Berlin's essay one encounters three different, not necessarily related, versions of 'positive freedom': (1) freedom as individual self-mastery (rule by the 'real' self); (2) 'ability' (the power to do something); (3) collective 'self-determination' (not being governed by another State or society).¹⁷ For Berlin, positive liberty is to be understood only in sense (1). He does not identify positive liberty with (2), although he has been frequently misquoted in this respect.¹⁸ He also tries to separate (3) from liberty, including positive liberty, although on this point he is more ambivalent (IBLP 71–2). All three of these versions of positive freedom display what Berlin called its 'porous' character to the highest degree, absorbing certain natural or social characteristics alongside the true features of liberty. Negative freedom, on the other hand, depends strictly on external conditions, and in particular on actions by other persons that may interfere with one's opportunity to act.

Berlin is clear that the idea of freedom, whether negative or positive, should not be confused with the idea of ability, which is sometimes referred to as 'effective freedom' (Swift 2001, 55). Berlin's insistence on this point was liable to provoke criticism from the Left, and it did. Socialists complained that to describe a person deprived of physical or financial means as free is profoundly misleading. One might as well say that a tramp is 'free' to dine at the Ritz—a statement that, though not meaningless, raises obvious problems. It was easy for these critics, in particular the Marxists, to relate Berlin's own social situation to his understanding

17. These three senses of freedom are clearly distinguished by Adam Swift, who wrongly supposes that Berlin confuses them (2001, 55–68; cf. IBLP 67–8).

18. Especially by economists, who in fact take their lead from Amartya Sen (1988).

of liberty: they were reassured in their belief that 'Freedom for an Oxford don' is indeed 'a very different thing from freedom for an Egyptian peasant' (L 171). Nevertheless, Berlin held his ground. In so far as the criticisms bore on conceptual analysis, he rebutted some of them, while also conceding that political consequences did not follow automatically from the conceptual autonomy of negative liberty (L 171–4). Returning to this point in 1969, he added a helpful clarification, distinguishing liberty from the conditions in which it can be exercised (L 38). To be negatively free is one thing; to have the financial means to use this freedom is something else. Confusing liberty with its conditions does not foster the cause of emancipation or equality, and is very likely to give rise to dangerous illusions. A careful reading of the lecture shows that exposing this kind of conceptual confusion was one of Berlin's aims. 'Everything is what it is', and 'nothing is gained by a confusion of terms' (L 172).

Berlin's responses to the standard socialist objections to negative freedom might appear to today's reader the most outdated part of the lecture. Berlin himself has explicitly recognised that the historical situation in which the essay was conceived and written influenced the internal organisation of the text, and the relative emphasis given to different parts of his analysis. Had he written the lecture today, the 'search for status' would no doubt have been allotted a much larger role. The increased attention that nationality and the 'struggle for recognition' receive in Berlin's later writings can be traced back to his inaugural lecture. But it would be misleading to say that Berlin's defence of the conceptual autonomy and meaningfulness of negative liberty rests only on contingent motivations. If, as I have argued, the lecture should be read as a contribution to philosophy, Berlin's theoretical preoccupations should be taken at face value. Among these, the determination to dispel confusion and promote understanding is clearly paramount (IBLP 71–2). The same considerations apply when Berlin underlines the importance of agency for the identification of those instances of prevention that create unfreedom. If the impossibility of doing something depends on natural accidents (as when one is prevented from crossing the road by a tree that has been felled by lightning), clearly such prevention lies beyond the pale of freedom.¹⁹

Another notion that Berlin is eager to keep distinct from liberty is collective self-government. From the point of view of the history of ideas it is easy to see

19. Miller 1983. Bernard Williams has pointed out another aspect of the importance of agency that is compatible with Berlin's approach. According to Williams, 'the restriction of our activities by the intentional activities of others, as contrasted with the ubiquitous limitations we face in nature, can give rise to a quite specific reaction, resentment; and if resentment is not to express itself in more conflict, non-co-operation, and dissolution of social relations, an authoritative determination is needed of whose activities should have priority' (2001, 82).

why these notions are confused in ordinary parlance. The struggle for collective self-rule has often found its expression in the language of liberty. This issue was raised by Charles Taylor in a seminal contribution (1979), and has been revived recently by Quentin Skinner. According to Skinner, Berlin's understanding of negative freedom as non-interference does not rule out the possibility that freedom is compatible with non-democratic government. Starting from Berlin's premisses, one has to deny that there is a logical connection between freedom and democracy, a conclusion Skinner regards as untenable. As evidence for the prosecution, Skinner quotes TCL, mentioning the passage where Berlin distinguishes liberty from other values, such as equality or self-government (Skinner 1998, 113–15). According to Berlin, negative freedom is indeed compatible with autocracy or with the absence of self-government (L 176). This conclusion might sound shocking to some, but it is only a consequence of the idea that being free or unfree is a matter of fact, contingent on the degree of other people's interference. The outcome of such interference, in so far as it amounts to prevention, is clearly logically independent of the kind of political regime one happens to live under.

Skinner regards Berlin's solution as flawed. Accordingly he has put forward what he sees as a third concept of liberty. This 'neo-Roman' theory of freedom (the name is a tribute to the republican *libertas* of the Romans) can be summed up by saying that (i) there is a connection between the freedom of an individual and the freedom of the community to which he or she belongs; and that (ii) there is a further connection between the freedom of an individual and the fact that he or she is not subordinated to an arbitrary power. If these two conditions are not fulfilled, a person cannot be said to be politically free (Skinner 1998, 23–57). Skinner's objection assumes that TCL is meant as a complete list of the legitimate uses of the word 'freedom'. In any event, there are passages where Berlin comes close to the acknowledgement of non-domination as a reasonable extension of liberty.²⁰

Recently Skinner has returned to the third concept of liberty in a lecture that is more sympathetic towards the complexity of Berlin's arguments (2002b).²¹ But he has not altered the substance of his position or the fundamental character of his criticisms. In particular, he assumes too straightforward a connection between Berlin's analysis and defence of negative liberty and his liberalism. These are cer-

20. L 32, 201. According to George Crowder, 'This can be done either by extending negative liberty to include the absence of dependence, or by interpreting the positive idea to embrace non-domination as an aspect of authentic self-direction, or by conceiving of non-domination as a different kind of freedom altogether' (IBLP 88). Berlin's approach leaves all these options open, but the structure of the lecture suggests that he would have regarded them as analogical extensions, not as expressions of the core meaning of liberty.

21. See the discussion of the 'republican' critique of Berlin in IBLP 87–90.

tainly related in so far as Berlin is convinced that the recognition of an area of protection from interference is a necessary feature of a liberal regime. However, according to Berlin, this is not a sufficient condition of liberalism. A social and cultural environment that is friendly towards a variety of life-plans, lifestyles and modes of thought is a further condition whose satisfaction is not guaranteed simply by non-interference.

Contrary to widespread opinion, Berlin's defence of the conceptual autonomy of negative liberty should not be interpreted as if it were a straightforward political statement. The distinction between the two concepts of liberty is, in the first instance, a contribution to the understanding of the category of freedom. Only after we have freed ourselves from confused notions of freedom can we examine the rival merits of different social arrangements. According to Berlin, a liberal regime, which includes a measure of negative freedom, is better than the alternatives, including those based on positive liberty. This, however, is not sufficient to show that Berlin is a 'negative libertarian', as Skinner seems to suggest (2002b, 264–5), if that means that negative liberty is overriding.

NEGATIVE VERSUS POSITIVE LIBERTY

The distinction between negative and positive freedom is paradigmatic in contemporary political theory, and it bears witness to the impact of TCL that Berlin is often credited with its introduction. This widespread impression, as Berlin himself says, is historically inaccurate.²² The remote origin of the distinction is in Kant, who uses 'negative' and 'positive' to describe two different ways of defining practical freedom. In the first sense, freedom is said to be negative because it is characterised negatively as independence of determination by sensible impulses. In the second sense, freedom is said to be positive because it is characterised positively as determinability by the moral law.²³ This is not the place to pursue the complex issues of interpretation that the Kantian doctrine of practical freedom has provoked (see Engstrom 2002, 294–8). Nevertheless, there is one aspect of

22. For educated readers raised in the first half of the twentieth century the distinction was familiar because it was used by the British Idealists, and through their influence had entered the wider social and political debate. See Green 1895, 2–27; Bosanquet 1899, 124–40. Among Berlin's contemporaries in Oxford, the distinction had already been employed by John Plamenatz (1938, 68). The distinction is also used by de Ruggiero (1925, 338–9; 350 in the English translation). Although Berlin does not mention de Ruggiero's book, it is very likely that he knew it through Collingwood, its English translator.

23. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), part 1, book 1, chapter 1, section 8, theorem 4.

Kant's treatment of freedom that is worthy of attention because it sheds further light on Berlin's essay. Kant says that it is not possible to grasp the essence (*Wesen*) of freedom through the negative definition. The positive definition, on the other hand, flows from the negative and is richer and more fruitful. This way of characterising the difference between the two kinds of freedom is very likely to be the origin of Green's and Bosanquet's assumption that positive liberty should be seen as the 'real', hence superior, version of freedom. As his discussion of positive liberty shows, Berlin was aware of the intuitive appeal of such a thesis.

Nevertheless, Berlin saw a fundamental problem in the positive definition. If liberty consists in not being a slave to someone, such a definition also applies reflexively. One can be at the mercy of one's own desires, even if also aware of good reasons to resist them. A smoker knows he must quit because smoking is bad for him, but cannot resist a cigarette. Such a situation, as Berlin pointed out, gives credibility to the idea of a divided self, one part claiming control over its actions and one part shunning such control (L 180). In the case of the hypothetical smoker in conflict with himself, control is not exercised, as it should be, by the rational part that orders him to quit, but by the irrational part that prefers the pleasure of a cigarette and ignores the damage caused by smoking. But what is it that the rational part of the self does? Given common presuppositions about rationality, it is natural to say that the rational self applies universal criteria for the selection of goals. This capacity, however, is not uniformly spread among the population, because we know that some people do not act rationally. Given this premiss, then if one is absolutely convinced that one knows the real goals at which a person's actions should aim, one can feel authorised to compel others to realise their proper goals. Can one say that a person who compels someone else to do something is a liberator? Does that not involve a paradox according to which 'real' freedom consists in being compelled to act in one's best interest? For Berlin, historical experience suggests, as a natural development of such an idea, that a person who is compelled in this way is no longer treated as autonomous, but instead as part of a collective being whose rational soul must impose its own free will on its recalcitrant limbs. With this last conceptual slide, we reach the bottom of a slippery slope. The idea of freedom seems to justify totalitarianism, with its complement of torture, censorship and violence.

The leading character in this intellectual drama is Kant. His ideas on liberty, as authors such as Green and Bosanquet show, can lead to conclusions that are inimical to the very possibility of leading an autonomous life. Under a regime in which a 'rationalist' interpretation of positive liberty is paramount, a person might end up being treated as a means, not as an end in itself (L 183–4). Having realised, on the basis of the historical evidence, that the concept of positive liberty is particularly liable to distortion, Berlin turned to negative liberty in search

of an antidote to positive liberty's paternalist disease. As his treatment of the measurement of freedom shows, he is convinced that negative liberty, whatever its defects from other points of view, is less vulnerable to such distortions.²⁴ The peculiar 'objectivity' of negative liberty relies in its being a fact, something whose existence depends ultimately on causal interactions among bodies.

Berlin inverts Kant's order of priority between the two concepts:

The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others. The rest is extension of this sense or else metaphor. To strive to be free is to seek to remove obstacles; to struggle for personal freedom is to seek to curb interference, exploitation, enslavement by men whose ends are theirs, not one's own. (L 48)

A moment's reflection on the paradigmatic case of unfreedom—being prevented from doing something by the interference of others—brings out the reason for this inversion. Negative liberty is 'fundamental' because it is closer to the basic experience of bodily interaction, which Berlin rightly regards as belonging to the solid background of the objective material world.²⁵ With positive liberty we enter a different realm, whose intentional dimension opens up the possibility of a much wider range of interpretations.

As the subsequent debate has shown, Berlin's reliance on the objectivity of negative liberty loses its strength progressively as one moves further from the paradigmatic case. As he recognises in *TCL*, the extent to which the stockbroker's action prevents the shopkeeper from doing something is highly disputable, and depends on larger issues such as the susceptibility of different kinds of event to different kinds of explanation.²⁶

Berlin's equivocation on the topic of measurement opened up a gap in his defence of negative freedom as a political standard—a gap that Charles Taylor exploited to put forward a new version of the idea of positive liberty (1979). A crucial step in Taylor's argument relies on comparative judgements between different people or societies. In an underdeveloped country with a dictatorial regime that imposes atheism there is no freedom of religion, but neither are there traffic-

24. According to Berlin, negative liberty is not immune to distortions. However, his reconstruction of the thought of positive libertarians such as Rousseau, Hegel and Fichte shows that he regarded their understanding of freedom as more likely to be incompatible with the defence of an area of non-interference in a person's activities.

25. Bernard Williams calls this basic sense of freedom 'primitive'. He writes: 'this is the place to start because [primitive freedom] involves a quite basic human phenomenon, and that phenomenon already points in the direction of politics' (2001, 79, 82).

26. L 000, Gray 1980.

lights that restrict the freedom of motorists. A democracy in an industrialised country, on the other hand, will probably have a system that recognises the freedom of all forms of religion, but also roads full of traffic-lights. A quantitative understanding of negative freedom might lead to the conclusion that there is more freedom under the dictatorship than under the democratic regime. For Taylor, the intuitive implausibility of such a conclusion suggests that purely quantitative criteria are inadequate for the assessment of freedom. This means that we should look elsewhere. Restrictions on the circulation of traffic are not particularly significant from an evaluative point of view, and are therefore of little relevance to our freedom.²⁷

Taylor's solution to the problem of assessing degrees of liberty relies on the idea that the notion of freedom has a built-in reference to purposes. He claims that our judgements about freedom are a function of purposes and their relative evaluations. But this amounts to a rejection of the whole notion of negative freedom, which involves a claim of fact, independent of purposes. The alternative, teleological, account of freedom developed in Taylor's essay is close to the traditional understanding of positive liberty. Taylor claims that once this link between freedom and purpose is accepted, we are compelled to slide a fair way down the slippery slope that so preoccupied Berlin. In particular, we need to recognise that internal restrictions are 'real' (there is such a thing as acting against one's own best judgement), and also that there are goals that have objective value. However, Taylor thinks it is still an open question whether the truth of these contentions amounts to a slide towards totalitarianism.

Taylor's argument has been criticised by pointing out that he conflates the measurement and evaluation of freedom (Carter 1999, 148–65). Such a conflation, for those who do not subscribe to his objective theory of values, is clearly a mistake. Whether this would also have been Berlin's reply is not clear, at least if one takes seriously his unclarity about the qualitative dimensions of freedom. Nevertheless, his scepticism towards the idea of objective reason, which has a crucial role in his criticism of positive liberty, is incompatible with Taylor's views on purpose. Berlin was certainly not a perfectionist. He believed in the objectivity of at least some fundamental human values, but his pluralism allows that such values can be legitimately combined in many ways, thus ruling out 'thicker' theories of the human good such as Taylor's.

Even if the analysis of freedom as a political value leaves room for views such as Taylor's (Williams 2001, 81), a recognition of the plurality of values and the creative role of human choice in interpreting them seems bound to require

27. This part of Taylor's argument, however, assumes a notion of negative liberty different from Berlin's.

areas of individual liberty where people can pursue their projects without interference (Gray 1995, 31).

TCL is neither the last nor the fullest statement of pluralism in Berlin's thought. However, it is here that its connection with liberalism is made explicit for the first time. The ultimate motivating force of Berlin's classical statement of liberalism is the possibility that a distortion of the concept of liberty may lead to a society that systematically obstructs the plurality of value. Berlin could have adopted Montaigne's description of life as 'un mouvement inégal, irrégulier et multiforme'²⁸ as the epigraph for his inaugural lecture. Its contribution to our understanding of this feature of humanity, and of the conditions for its preservation, guarantees its lasting value.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I should like to thank Ian Carter, George Crowder, Henry Hardy and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on a previous draft.

28. 1588, paragraph 2 ('a rough, irregular progress with a multitude of forms, Montaigne ed. Screech 922).