

# [Berlin’s account of negative liberty](https://assignbuster.com/berlins-account-of-negative-liberty/)

In Two Concepts of Liberty, Berlin sets about establishing a clear concept of liberty. He begins by articulating what he perceives to be the fundamental difference between the way in which people understand liberty – namely the distinction between negative and positive liberty. The negative view of liberty, according to Berlin (2006), necessitates freedom from ‘ interference by other persons’ (p. 369). The positive view, on the other hand, necessitates freedom to be ‘ self-directed’ and ‘ one’s own master’ (ibid., p. 397).

Berlin’s intention was not simply to describe the two types of liberty; he stresses the dangers of the positive view, simultaneously claiming that negative liberty is ‘ truer and more humane’ (ibid., p. 384). In this essay, I will critically asses Berlin’s account of negative freedom, with reference to existing contributions in the literature. Ultimately, I will argue that creating a distinction between the two types of liberty can be useful, but that Berlin is wrong to claim that the negative view is ‘ truer’.

The negative view of liberty, then, concerns freedom fromexternal constraints; ‘ if I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree’ (Berlin, 2006, ibid., p. 369). Whereas the positive view concerns self-mastery: ‘ I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own’ (ibid., p. 373). The distinction that Berlin makes is initially valuable as, in his own words, the concept of freedom ‘ is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist’ (ibid., p. 369). While most political philosophers would agree on the desirability of freedom, ideas about the correct definition are much less unanimous.

Berlin’s aversion to positive liberty largely stems from his belief that there are too many competing human values and goals for them to be objectively prioritised – an idea referred to as ‘ Moral Pluralism’ (Galston, 2011, p. 154). As Berlin himself puts it, ‘ To assume that all values can be graded on one scale . . . seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents’ (ibid., p. 384). This is essentially what leads him to doubt those who claim to be capable of advocating on behalf of other people’s freedom. When put into practice, Berlin argues, citizens of a state which is free according to the positive view, would be governed by ‘ such laws as they would themselves have enacted had they been asked what, as rational beings, they demanded’; but who exactly, he asks, would decide exactly what rational beings ought to desire? (ibid., p. 379). Instead, Berlin holds that individuals are only really free when they are protected from external constraints and left to make choices without interference.

Berlin does, however, accept that ‘ liberty is not the only goal of man’ (ibid., p. 371) and, thus, acknowledges that there are certain situations in which freedom must be foregone in the interest of other values. Nevertheless, he is concerned that some advocates of positive liberty take this as an opportunity to falsely equate other values with freedom. In Berlin’s own words, ‘ Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness’ (ibid.). This appears to be one of Berlin’s most significant justifications for claiming that the negative view is the ‘ truer’ of the two conceptions of liberty. For Berlin, liberty can only be liberty in the negative sense and it ceases to be liberty when other values are included in the definition.

MacCallum (1967) criticises Berlin’s two ideas of liberty, arguing that ‘ the distinction between them has never been made sufficiently clear’ (p. 312). In response to Berlin, MacCallum offers an alternative interpretation of liberty, in which freedom can be explained by a single ‘ triadic relation’; between ‘ agents’, ‘ constraints’, and the ‘ actions or conditions’ which agents are either free or not free to realise (ibid., p. 314). Unlike Berlin, he deliberately neglects to narrowly define what constitutes a constraint, in order to illustrate that every claim about liberty inevitably leads to a tension between negative and positive liberty . Rather than making a normative claim about the relative strengths of negative and positive liberty, MacCallum’s single concept of freedom more accurately reflects the ongoing debate between advocates of each type of liberty. In other words, there will always be disagreement over how his triadic relation is interpreted, just as there will always be disagreement over what can acceptably be considered a constraint on freedom. For instance, advocates of Berlin’s negative view argue that the constraint must be external, while advocates of the positive view argue that internal, psychological issues can also impinge on freedom. Therefore, by recognising that Berlin’s distinction is unnecessary, and that no one type of freedom can be ‘ truer’ than another, MacCallum constructs an account which more accurately reflects historical discourse.

Despite the apparent persuasiveness of MacCallum’s account, Christman (2005) claims that the triadic conception of liberty is not necessarily a fatal blow to Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty. In Christman’s own words, MacCallum’s work ‘ does not actually dissolve the distinction, it merely locates it in a different place’ and demonstrates that ‘ we should think about freedom as one overarching conceptual schema allowing for several different conceptions’ (p. 81). Berlin’s two distinctions could conceivably remain within this different understanding of freedom. Regardless, Berlin’s distinction is still useful as a way to describe the way in which liberty is contested and as a way of recognising the enduring differences in the arguments. MacCallum (1967) rightly claims that the question is not which interpretation ‘ is the only, the “ truest,” or the “ most worthwhile” freedom’ (p. 312), but this does not mean that Berlin’s distinction is not still useful for examining arguments about how liberty should be conceptualised.

Therefore, it seems that there is at least some use in preserving distinctions between the different interpretations of freedom. I will now attempt to demonstrate that Berlin was wrong to describe negative liberty as the ‘ truer’ form. Taylor (2006) highlights a fundamental flaw in Berlin’s position by supplementing the distinction between negative and positive liberty with some important detail.  Firstly, he notes that negative ideas of liberty are usually an ‘ opportunity-concept’ – in that freedom concerns ‘ what we can do’ and not whether ‘ we do anything to exercise these options’ (p. 388). Secondly, he notes that positive theories must be an ‘ exercise-concept’ – in that ‘ we can’t say that someone is free, on a self-realisation view, if he is totally unrealised’ (ibid.). In other words, according to the positive view, simply having the opportunity to be free is not enough; one must then carry out the action of being free. With this distinction, Taylor cleverly isolates the problem with Berlin’s preference for negative liberty. For Berlin, freedom constitutes being free from external interference and being able to do as one desires, but, as Taylor highlights, acting on desires does not necessarily reflect self-mastery, or self-realisation (ibid., 392). Indeed, people have bad desires, which can even lead them to act in a way they know to be ‘ bad or despicable’ (ibid.). Therefore, Berlin’s idea that internal struggles, or desires, cannot alone be a basis for unfreedom, is difficult to defend.

Berlin is clearly wrong, then, to neglect the role of self-realisation in the pursuit of freedom. I also agree with Taylor (2006) that Berlin presents an ‘ absurd caricature’ (p. 387) of positive liberty by claiming that it risks justifying totalitarianism. Berlin’s (2006) assertion here is that, according to the positive view, ‘ Liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, becomes virtually identical with it’ (p. 380). Berlin lived and wrote during a period of history which saw ideas of positive freedom exploited to justify horrific atrocities – such as the Holocaust during World War II – and this clearly had a profound impact on his work. Thus, is it easy to understand why Berlin might be distrusting of positive liberty and it is also undeniably important to learn from our history, but he is still not justified in associating proponents of positive freedom with totalitarian regimes, based on abhorrent actions that have been carried out merely under the guise of positive freedom. In fact, I believe that, far from trying to force others to adopt their ideas, advocates of the positive view simply aspire to help others attain self-mastery, so they are better equipped to benefit from negative liberty.

Thus, Berlin’s two concepts are not at odds with one another, rather positive liberty goes further and argues that the attainment of freedom must incorporate the idea of self-realisation. As such, I do not agree that negative liberty is the ‘ truer’ form because, alone, it is clearly insufficient.

To conclude, despite MacCallum’s objections, there is clearly a use in distinguishing between the different arguments for how we should conceptualise freedom. Berlin was incorrect, however, as Christman and Taylor suggest, to claim that negative liberty is the ‘ truer’ form: alone, it is insufficient, as the attainment of freedom also requires self-realisation, which necessitates freedom from internal constraints.

## References

* Berlin, I. (2006) ‘ Two Concepts of Liberty ’, in R. E. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds.), Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 369-386.
* Christman, J. (2005) ‘ Saving Positive Freedom’, Political Theory , 33 (1), 79-88.
* Galston, W. (2011) ‘ Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isiah Berlin’s Heterodox Liberalism’, in C. H. Zuckert (ed.), Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Authors and Arguments, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 154-169.
* MacCallum, G. C. (1967) ‘ Negative and Positive Freedom’, The Philosophical Review , 76 (3), 312-334.
* Taylor, C. (2006) ‘ What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty?’, in R. E. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds.), Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 387-397.