

LIBERTY

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This entry discusses the concept of political liberty only – that is, what it means for a person or group to enjoy liberty or freedom in a political sense. It will not discuss freedom of the will, or what was at one time debated under the heading of ‘liberty and necessity’ (on which see *FREE WILL*).

It is notorious that there are several competing conceptions of political liberty. The standard account was laid down most influentially by Isaiah BERLIN in his famous 1958 lecture on ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. According to the first, *negative* conception of liberty, one is free simply to the extent that one is not interfered with. There are many variations on this conception, depending on how exactly one chooses to define ‘interference’, but they all have in common the basic intuition that to be free is, more or less, to be left alone to do whatever one chooses. This idea of negative liberty Berlin associates especially with the classic English political philosophers HOBBS, BENTHAM and J.S. MILL, and it is today probably the dominant conception, particularly among contemporary Anglo-American philosophers. In Mill’s words, ‘the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs’ (*On Liberty*, p. 17).

The second, *positive* conception of liberty is not so easy to define. Roughly speaking, a person or group is free in the positive sense to the extent that he or they exercise self-control or self-mastery. It is not agreed, however, what exactly constitutes this self-mastery. According to one particularly influential account, offered by Harry Frankfurt, to be free in the positive sense is to be able to act on one’s second-order desires. For example, the addicted gambler may be free in the negative sense not to gamble (no one forces him to gamble), but he is not free in the positive sense unless he could actually succeed in acting on his second-order desire not to desire gambling. Alternative accounts of positive liberty abound, however. Berlin associates this second conception especially with such continental philosophers as Spinoza, Rousseau and HEGEL. Although it found some support among English Hegelians including T.H. GREEN, those who advocate the positive conception of liberty have been, particularly among contemporary Anglo-American philosophers, in the minority.

Berlin was by no means the first to distinguish two competing conceptions of political liberty. His lecture owes much to a speech delivered in 1819 by Benjamin Constant on ‘The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns’, which presents an analogous (though not quite identical) dichotomy. What is

striking, however, is that *both* the positive *and* the negative conceptions of political liberty are of comparatively recent origin. Prior to the seventeenth century, political liberty was not an especially controversial notion: it had a largely uncontested meaning that was, moreover, distinct from either of these modern conceptions. There were long periods during which liberty or political freedom was not widely considered an important political value. Even in those times, however, there was little dispute concerning what it *meant* to enjoy political liberty – only whether it was more important than, say, peace, security, salvation or JUSTICE.

For a person or group to enjoy political liberty, in this older view, was simply for them to enjoy a certain sort of independence. Roughly speaking, freedom was understood as the sort of independence enjoyed by an individual who, not being a slave, serf, bondsman or servant, does not have a master and so is a ‘free man’; or, analogously, the sort of independence enjoyed by a community that does not live under the rule of an autocratic king, tyrant, oligarchy or foreign empire, and so is a ‘free people’. In part because the meaning of political liberty was not the subject of controversy, its precise scope remained vague and open-ended. It was a negative ideal, in the sense that to enjoy liberty was simply *not* to have a master of one sort or another; but it was not the negative conception as that is now understood, for having a master might be consistent with enjoying considerable freedom from interference. An imperial power might, for example, refrain from interfering much with the local administration of its colonies, and yet those colonies do not, in the older view, enjoy political freedom thereby.

The older conception of political liberty had its roots in the ancient world. In Greece, freedom (*elutheria*) was viewed as the independence a man feared to lose if he was captured in war (to be made a slave), or if he succumbed to debt (to become a bondsman). It was also the self-rule of the independent city-states that Athens defended at Marathon and Salamis against Persian imperialism. At Rome, liberty (*libertas*) was thought to have been established when the Tarquins were chased out, briefly endangered when the Decemviri tried to seize permanent authority, and finally lost in the dissolution of the Republic by the Caesars. Historically speaking, philosophical interest in freedom or liberty was greatest when it was felt to be in danger. It is most energetically extolled in Herodotus’s and Aeschylus’s writings on the Persian wars, or by Aristotle and Demosthenes as the independent city-states fell under Macedonian rule. Similarly, most Latin reflections on liberty come from around the time of the collapse of the Republic, especially in the works of Cicero, Sallust and Livy.

And after centuries of relative disinterest, a similar pattern was repeated during the Renaissance: although independent city-state republics populated Northern Italy for most of the middle ages, only in the fifteenth century – as their self-rule faced increasing domestic and foreign challenges – did Bruni, Rinuccini and Machiavelli pen their panegyrics to freedom and liberty.

It was this older conception of political liberty that the early-modern English political writers inherited. While they were certainly well read in the classical and Renaissance sources mentioned above, the text that – directly or indirectly – informed them most profoundly was not produced by a political theorist at all. It was rather the *Corpus Iuris* of Justinian that for centuries fixed the meaning of liberty in Western political thought. Early on, the *Digest* states flatly that all law concerns persons, things or actions, and that the main distinction among persons is that between those who are free on the one hand, and those who are slaves on the other. This sharp contrast between freedom and servitude is reiterated again and again in the *Corpus*, and constitutes one of its fundamental conceptual legacies. It is hardly surprising, then, that it was above all to this notion of liberty that writers such as MILTON, HARRINGTON, SIDNEY and LOCKE unconsciously turned during England's constitutional struggles of the seventeenth century.

But it was also around this time that Hobbes introduced the negative conception of liberty. His aim was largely political. The older view held that absolute sovereignty was incompatible with liberty and Hobbes was well aware of the powerful rhetorical force of an appeal to freedom. In order to diffuse this appeal, he needed a conception of liberty that could be shown to be compatible with absolute sovereignty. The negative conception satisfies this requirement. In the negative view, freedom is merely the 'silence of the laws', as Hobbes puts it (*Leviathan*, p. 146), and there can be as many or as few laws under any one form of government as any other. Thus, he concludes, there can be no grounds for objecting to absolute sovereignty on the basis of liberty *per se*. Hobbes's view did not immediately take hold. On the contrary, we find an especially clear statement of the traditional view a generation later in Locke: freedom is not 'a liberty for every one to do what he lists', he writes, but rather 'to have a standing rule to live by' and 'not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man' (*Two Treatises*, p. 110). Indeed, the traditional conception remains dominant well into the eighteenth century, as is clear from a reading of *Cato's Letters*, Blackstone's *Commentaries* or the pro-American pamphlets of PRIESTLEY, R. PRICE or PAINE. But in time, the practical and philosophical merits of

the negative conception of liberty attract Jeremy Bentham and William PALEY, and their combined influence was such that, when J.S. Mill wrote his essay *On Liberty* in the 1850s, few traces of the older conception remained.

Credit for introducing the positive conception of liberty into mainstream political thought is usually given to Spinoza or Rousseau, though the idea itself (employed generally in a non-political context) had roots as far back as the Stoics. Like Hobbes, Rousseau was interested in showing that freedom is consistent with absolute sovereignty – provided, in his version of argument, that the sovereign is the whole body of citizens. He does this by drawing a distinction between the 'natural liberty' enjoyed in the state of nature on the one hand (roughly, the negative liberty of Hobbes), and the 'civil liberty' enjoyed through community on the other. The latter he defines as 'obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself' (*The Basic Political Writings*, p. 151), in other words, as self-mastery or positive liberty in the modern sense. It was this conception of liberty that, via KANT, so influenced Hegel and his followers; and it was the potentially troubling consequence of it (in Rousseau's own words, one can be 'forced to be free' [p. 150] on the positive liberty view) that later motivated Berlin's famous lecture.

Although the negative-positive liberty dichotomy continues to shape discussion among contemporary political philosophers, there has recently been a revival of interest in the traditional view. Beginning primarily with historical work on Machiavelli and the classical republican tradition, and increasingly branching out into areas of contemporary normative POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit and others have recently up-ended the conceptual topography laid down by Berlin, and it is difficult to foresee where the debate will go from here.

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See also Ancient Philosophy; Foundations of State

LIDDEL, Duncan (1561–1613)

Duncan Liddel was born in Aberdeen and died there on 17 December 1613. After receiving his early education in Aberdeen, Liddel departed for the Continent in 1579, where he matriculated in the University of Frankfurt-ander-Oder. There he studied mathematics, philosophy and MEDICINE for the next six years, interrupted only by a year-long visit to Breslau. When an epidemic struck Frankfurt in 1585, Liddel moved on to the University of Rostock, where he took an MA in 1587. In Rostock he was befriended by several eminent men: the astronomer and professor of medicine Henrich Brucaeus, the famous humanist Johannes Caselius and the young philosopher Cornelius Martini, who was to become one of the key figures in the revival of METAPHYSICS in Lutheran Germany. Probably thanks to Brucaeus, Liddel made the acquaintance of the great astronomer Tycho Brahe, whom he visited at least twice at his observatory in Denmark (June 1587 and June 1588). In 1590 Caselius accepted an invitation to the thriving young University of Helmstedt, where he seems to have been instrumental in the appointment of his two younger protégés, Liddel and Martini, to the chairs of mathematics and LOGIC respectively. In Helmstedt, Liddel completed his medical studies: he received an MD in 1596 and was made Professor of Medicine in 1600 (without relinquishing the chair of mathematics until 1603). In 1607 he returned to Scotland, but of his last years little is known aside from the fact of his generous endowments to Marischal College, Aberdeen.

Liddel was a many-faceted and open-minded thinker. Well versed in mathematics, astronomy and medicine as well as in philosophy and theology, he combined a mastery of traditional learning with a receptive consideration of intellectual innovation. In astronomy he was, according to Caselius, the first in Germany to teach the hypothesis of Tycho Brahe, which represented a compromise between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican systems. In fact, his teaching of the geoheliocentric system provoked accusations of plagiarism from Brahe, to which Liddel responded by denying that he never claimed to have invented the general form of the system, but merely to have developed some of its mathematical details. In medicine, he based his two highly regarded major works – the *Ars medica* (1607) and *De febribus* (1610) – primarily on the tradition of Galenic medicine, but gave consideration to the controversial new doctrines of Paracelsus as well. But it is perhaps his participation in one of the most important theological controversies to erupt during his stay in Germany which best illustrates Liddel's stature as a philosopher displaying both mastery of the tradition and remarkable independence of thought. Between