

Freedom, History of

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Abstract

This article discusses the history of the ideal of political freedom from ancient times to the present day. Prior to the seventeenth century, political freedom was widely understood to mean not having a master, but the value and feasibility of this good was contested. Hobbes introduced the 'negative' conception of freedom as noninterference in the seventeenth century, and Rousseau introduced the 'positive' conception of freedom as effective self-mastery in the eighteenth century. The debate between these two conceptions has dominated discussions ever since, obscuring the older and once widely shared view.

This article discusses the history of the political ideal of freedom or liberty, that is, what it means for a person or group to enjoy freedom or liberty in the political sense. (Freedom and liberty are simply two words for the same concept, the first of Germanic and the second of Latin origin; they will here be used interchangeably.) This article will thus not discuss freedom of the will and determinism, or what was at one time debated under the heading of 'liberty and necessity'.

As is well known, the meaning of political freedom is presently the subject of much debate among political theorists and philosophers. Remarkably, this was not always so. Indeed, prior to the late eighteenth century, its meaning was debated relatively little, and prior to the mid-seventeenth century, scarcely at all. This is not to say that there were no vigorous debates about freedom or liberty before that time; quite the contrary, as we shall see. But these debates generally did not concern what it meant for a person or group to enjoy freedom in the political sense.

Historical Origins

For a person or group to enjoy freedom or liberty in the political sense, on the long-standing standard 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 person', 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 freedom was not itself the subject of controversy, its precise scope remained vague and open-ended. It was a negative ideal, in the straightforward sense that to enjoy freedom was simply *not* to have a master of one sort or another.

This traditional conception of political freedom or liberty had its roots in the ancient world. In Greece, freedom (*eleuthera*) was viewed as the independence men and women feared to lose if they were captured in war or succumbed to debt and thus became slaves. In the *Iliad*, Hektor tells his wife that he is troubled less by the prospect of Troy's fall than by

...the thought of you, when some bronze-armored Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty, in tears; and in Argos you

must work at the loom of another...unwilling, but strong will be the necessity upon you.
(p. 165)

Freedom was analogously understood as the self-rule of independent city-states that Athens and her allies defended at Marathon and Salamis against Persian imperialism. Thus, according to Herodotus, a Spartan explained to a Persian that

You understand well enough what slavery is, but freedom you have never experienced, so you do not know if it tastes sweet or bitter. If you ever did come to experience it, you would advise us to fight for it not with spears only, but with axes too.
(p. 413)

At Rome, liberty (*libertas*) was thought to have been established when the Tarquins were expelled, briefly endangered when the decemviri tried to seize permanent authority for themselves, and finally lost in the dissolution of the Republic by the Caesars. Cicero, for example, observes that

...if the people hold to their own rights, they deny that there is anything more outstanding, more free, more blessed [A]nd so it is usual for the "concern of the people" to be liberated from the domination of kings and aristocrats, and not for kings or the power and wealth of an aristocracy to be sought by a free people.
(p. 21)

Historically speaking, philosophical interest in freedom or liberty was greatest when it was most felt to be in danger. It is most energetically extolled in Herodotus' and Aeschylus' writings on the Persian wars, or by Aristotle and Demosthenes as the independent city-states fell under Macedonian rule, for instance. 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. After centuries of relative disinterest, a similar pattern can be observed in the Renaissance: although independent city-state republics populated northern Italy for much 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 traditional conception that the early-modern English political writers inherited. While they were certainly well read in the classical and Renaissance sources that we have mentioned, 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 freedom that writers like Milton, Harrington, Sidney, and Locke unconsciously and repeatedly turned during England's constitutional struggles of the seventeenth century.

Now while there was little dispute concerning what it meant to enjoy freedom, there were many significant debates about freedom. Two controversies in particular frequently recurred. The first was normative, and concerned how highly freedom should be valued relative to other important social or political goods. While perhaps a majority of the ancients regarded freedom very highly indeed, there were always some dissenting opinions: Plato, for instance, argued vigorously in the *Republic* that justice was far more important than the freedom enjoyed by the citizens of a democracy. During the Middle Ages, advocates for the priority of freedom were decidedly in the minority. Far more important than freedom, argued Augustine, Aquinas, and many other writers, was peace and order. Debates concerning the relative value of freedom continued in the Renaissance and after. Castiglione illustrates the debate clearly in the fourth book of his *Book of the Courtier*, where one character argues that a free republic is the supreme gift of God, while another replies that a tranquil monarchy is more consistent with living a dignified life in peace and quiet.

The second recurring controversy was empirical. It concerned how much freedom could be safely enjoyed without undermining social order. Especially after the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, it was widely assumed that too much unstructured independence could be self-defeating, and thus self-government needed to be carefully balanced and contained within the framework of what Polybius termed a 'mixed constitution'. Subsequent advocates for political freedom, from Cicero to Machiavelli to Montesquieu, were all insistent that its preservation depended on maintaining a balanced political system and a strict rule of law. Critics of freedom, such as William Barclay and Robert Filmer, remained unconvinced that such a system could be self-sustaining; a society of 'masterless men', they believed, must necessarily slide into chaos.

Both these debates and others, however, revolved around a conception of freedom or liberty that was largely uncontroversial. While the relative value or practical feasibility of political freedom might be contested, it was largely taken for granted that everyone understood the idea under discussion: to be free was, plain and simple, to have no master.

Hobbes and Rousseau

Two great political thinkers, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were primarily responsible for upending the traditional understanding of political freedom and throwing its meaning into doubt. These thinkers were, respectively, Thomas Hobbes and J.-J. Rousseau.

Perhaps to a greater extent than any previous thinker, Hobbes recognized both the power, and also the mutability, of definitions. Writing during the English Civil War, and fervently believing that only the general recognition of an absolute sovereign could deliver an end to the conflicts of his day, Hobbes faced a peculiar challenge. On the long-standing traditional view, political freedom and absolute sovereignty are strictly incompatible. The advocates of limited sovereignty and commonwealth government accordingly leaned heavily on the powerful rhetorical appeal of freedom. Machiavelli had indeed observed the force of this appeal some time before:

Whoever becomes the master of a city accustomed to freedom, and does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed himself; because, when there is a rebellion, such a city justifies itself by calling on the name of liberty ... never forgotten despite the passing of time and the benefits received from the new ruler.
(p. 18)

In order to diffuse this rhetorical appeal, Hobbes sought a conception of freedom that, contrary to all previous understanding, could be shown compatible with absolute sovereignty. He found his answer in what is now widely called the 'negative' conception of freedom.

On the negative conception of freedom, we are free to the extent that we are merely not interfered with by others. There have been many variations on this conception since Hobbes, depending on how exactly one chooses to define 'interference' in the relevant sense, 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 pleases. Now of course the value in being left alone had long been recognized; contrary to popular opinion, even the ancients were perfectly well attuned to this value. Thus Thucydides recounts that Pericles approvingly remarked of Athens that

...just as our political system is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way
(p. 145)

But it was always recognized that an absence of interference – sometimes termed 'license' – is not at all the same as freedom or liberty in the political sense. (Indeed, it was pointed out by Machiavelli and others that too much of the former could actually undermine the latter by eroding the rule of law.) The two ideas are distinct because, while the traditional view of freedom is indeed 'negative' in the simple sense described earlier of consisting in the absence of something, having a master might easily be consistent with enjoying a considerable degree of noninterference. An imperial power might, for

example, refrain from interfering much with the local administration of its colonies, and yet those colonies do not, on the traditional view, thereby enjoy political freedom.

This last point is especially significant because it answers precisely to Hobbes's aims. On the new negative conception, as he says, political freedom is merely the "silence of the laws" (p. 146), and there can be as many or as few laws under any one form of government as under any other. Thus, he infers, there can be no logical grounds for objecting to absolute sovereignty on the basis of political freedom:

There is written on the turrets of the city of Lucca in great characters at this day, the word *libertas*; yet no man can thence infer, that a particular man has more liberty, or more immunity from the service of the commonwealth there, than in Constantinople. Whether a commonwealth be monarchical, or popular, the freedom is still the same.
(p. 143)

By redefining political freedom in this way, he hoped to defang the most potent objection to absolute sovereignty.

Not surprisingly, Hobbes's new conception did not immediately take hold. James Harrington among others quickly recognized the sleight of hand and pointed it out:

The mountain has brought forth, and we have a little equivocation! For to say that a Lucchese has no more liberty or immunity from the laws of Lucca than a Turk has from those of Constantinople, and to say that a Lucchese has no more liberty or immunity by the laws of Lucca than a Turk has by those of Constantinople, are pretty different speeches. The first may be said of all governments alike, the second scarce of any two; much less of these, seeing it is known that whereas the greatest bashaw is a tenant, as well of his head as of his estate, at the will of his lord, [while] the meanest Lucchese ... is a freeholder of both
(p. 20)

For some time thereafter, the negative conception of freedom remained no more than an intellectual curiosity. A generation later, we find an especially clear statement of the traditional view reiterated in John 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" (p. 110). Indeed, the traditional conception remained 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 Priestly, Price, or Paine. Only much later, as we shall see below, did Hobbes's negative conception of liberty catch on.

In the meantime, we must consider the second major challenge to the traditional conception of freedom, this one raised by Rousseau. Like Hobbes, Rousseau was interested in showing that freedom is consistent with absolute sovereignty – provided, on his version of argument, that the sovereign is the whole body of citizens. This he does by drawing a distinction between what he terms the "natural liberty" enjoyed in the state of nature on the one hand (roughly, the negative liberty of Hobbes), and what he terms the "civil liberty" enjoyed through community on the

other. The latter he defines as "obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself" (p. 151). This has come to be known as the 'positive' conception of freedom.

The positive conception of freedom is more difficult to characterize with analytic precision than the negative. Roughly speaking, persons or groups are free in the positive sense to the extent that they exercise some degree of self-control or self-mastery. It is not agreed, however, what exactly constitutes self-mastery in the relevant sense. 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 can actually succeed in acting on his second-order desire not to desire gambling. Applied to the political sphere, we can see that something like this thought animates Rousseau's conception: "to be driven by appetite alone", he says, "is slavery" (p. 151). It follows that, when the community as a whole compels one of its members to realize some second-order desire, he is merely "forced to be free" (p. 150).

Rousseau no more invented his distinctive conception of freedom out of whole cloth than did Hobbes. From the time of the Stoics, it had been commonplace to use the language of freedom and slavery when discussing the struggle to master one's own passions and desires. This language was adopted by early Christian writers, who frequently contrasted the 'slavery of sin' with the 'freedom of righteousness', a popular formula down to the time of Martin Luther's famous tract on "The Freedom of a Christian" and beyond. This usage was always clearly metaphorical, however. It was never suggested that freedom or liberty in the *political* sense should be understood in this manner. Indeed, the force of the metaphor in discussions of personal ethics was parasitic on the standard view of political freedom as consisting in the absence of a master. It was Rousseau (anticipated perhaps by Spinoza, but with little consequence for respectable opinion) who first advanced the positive conception as an account of *political* freedom, with remarkable consequences for the history of political thought, as we shall see.

III

In June 1789, representatives of the Third Estate abandoned the Estates-General and declared themselves the National Assembly of France. Together with the storming of the Bastille by the people of Paris in July, these events initiated what would become a quarter century of revolution, international war, and social turmoil in Europe – an experience that naturally had a great many consequences for the history of political thought generally, and for the concept of freedom or liberty specifically. When during the darkest days of the revolution the Committee of Public Safety subjected France to a reign of terror, it did so in the name of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. When Napoleon's armies spread across Europe, they did so in the name of revolutionary liberation. What were people to make of these proclamations?

Reflecting on such events a few years after peace had finally been restored, Benjamin Constant delivered a famous and influential speech on "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared

with that of the Moderns'. The societies of ancient Greece and Rome, he argued, were very different from our modern societies. They were small, tight-knit communities; their relative vulnerability meant that military affairs necessarily loomed larger than commercial affairs; and their employment of slave labor provided citizens with ample leisure. It is only to be expected, he said, that the ancients would understand political freedom in a manner reflecting their circumstances. For them, freedom meant "exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty" of the community as a whole. This they were able to do only because their societies were relatively small and because they enjoyed sufficient leisure time in which to dedicate themselves to public affairs. However, "the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community" is "compatible with this collective freedom". In the ancient societies, Constant claimed, no "importance was given to individual independence" (p. 311).

Modern societies are entirely different from ancient ones. They are large, diverse, and impersonal; commercial interests predominate over military interests; and of course, the practice of slavery has been abolished. The moderns, Constant said, have a very different conception of political freedom, better suited to their own times. On this modern view, freedom is simply

...the right of everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; [and] to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings.
(pp. 310–311)

It is immediately apparent that what is being described here is the negative liberty of Hobbes – the freedom to be left alone, without outside interference. Negative liberty, Constant claims, is the only sort of freedom suitable to modern conditions. The excesses of the French Revolution arose precisely from the futile dream, inspired by Rousseau, of reviving positive liberty of the ancients in modern times.

His diagnosis proved extremely influential. Many writers soon embraced enthusiastically the negative conception of freedom as noninterference, among them Jeremy Bentham and William Paley. Their combined influence was such that by the time J.S. Mill wrote his essay *On Liberty* in the 1850s, he could write without pausing for debate that "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" (p. 17). The negative conception of freedom is clearly the dominant view today, particularly among Anglo-American political theorists and philosophers. Of course, there has been a dissenting minority who did not give up on Rousseau's dream – Hegel, for instance, and some other continental philosophers. Later supporters of the positive conception of liberty include the English Hegelians like T.H. Green, and more recently, some communitarians like Charles Taylor, but these writers have never been able to overturn the dominance of the negative view.

Nearly a century and a half after Constant, Isaiah Berlin delivered an even more famous lecture reviewing the debate between positive and negative freedom, "Two Concepts of

Liberty'. Berlin reiterates Constant's warning against the dangers of positive liberty. "It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good which I am too blind to see", he says.

[T]his may, on occasion, be for my benefit [But] it is another to say that if it is my good, then I am not being coerced, for I have willed it, whether I know this or not, and am free (or 'truly' free) even when my poor earthly body and foolish mind bitterly reject it, and struggle against those who seek however benevolently to impose it
(p. 134)

This warning is, no doubt, well heeded. What is peculiar about Berlin's lecture, however, and about the earlier one by Constant on which it was (consciously or unconsciously) based, is that the positive conception of liberty attributed to the ancients was not in fact the understanding of political freedom to which they – nor indeed anyone, prior to Rousseau – subscribed. Negative liberty is held up as the political ideal much safer than its positive alternative, without apparently recognizing that both are modern inventions.

What explains this peculiar turn of events? One possibility, of course, is simply that the magnetic power of Rousseau's political writings sewed the confusion. For subsequent writers, 'the ancients' simply became the ancients as Rousseau imagined them, and the 'freedom' they enjoyed the conception of freedom Rousseau extolled: both those attracted to his vision and those repelled by it could no longer see past it clearly. Another possibility, however, is that deeper interests were at work. The early nineteenth century was a period in which the working classes, servants, women, and national minorities were steadily forcing themselves onto the political stage. Combining the traditional view of freedom or liberty with a more inclusive political ethic would have potentially revolutionary consequences, as a few writers astutely recognized: it would mean granting independence from mastery to women, to servants, and so forth. Thus William Paley suggests that

...those definitions of liberty ought to be rejected, which, by making that essential to civil freedom which is unattainable in experience, inflame expectations that can never be gratified, and disturb the public content with complaints, which no wisdom or benevolence of government can remove.
(p. 315)

Far less disruptive to the social order is the negative conception of political freedom which, as we have seen, is perfectly consistent with mastery so long as that master lets one alone. On this second reading of intellectual history, the positive conception of political freedom was little more than a convenient straw man.

Although the negative freedom–positive freedom dichotomy continues to shape discussion among contemporary political theorists and 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 challenged the conceptual topography laid

down by Constant and Berlin, and it is difficult to foresee where the debate will go from here.

See also: Berlin, Isaiah (1909–97); *Free Will and Action*; *French Revolution, The*; *Liberalism: Historical Aspects*; *Republicanism: Philosophical Aspects*; *Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712–78)*.

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Relevant Website

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/> – Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.