



## Philosophical Review

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Negative and Positive Freedom

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Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Jul., 1967), pp. 312-334

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of [Philosophical Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183622>

Accessed: 20-04-2015 16:29 UTC

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## NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOM

THIS PAPER challenges the view that we may usefully distinguish between two kinds or concepts of political and social freedom—negative and positive. The argument is not that one of these is the only, the “truest,” or the “most worthwhile” freedom, but rather that the distinction between them has never been made sufficiently clear, is based in part upon a serious confusion, and has drawn attention away from precisely what needs examining if the differences separating philosophers, ideologies, and social movements concerned with freedom are to be understood. The corrective advised is to regard freedom as always one and the same triadic relation, but recognize that various contending parties disagree with each other in what they understand to be the ranges of the term variables. To view the matter in this way is to release oneself from a prevalent but unrewarding concentration on “kinds” of freedom, and to turn attention toward the truly important issues in this area of social and political philosophy.

### I

Controversies generated by appeals to the presence or absence of freedom in societies have been roughly of four closely related kinds—namely (1) about the nature of freedom itself, (2) about the relationships holding between the attainment of freedom and the attainment of other possible social benefits, (3) about the ranking of freedom among such benefits, and (4) about the consequences of this or that policy with respect to realizing or attaining freedom. Disputes of one kind have turned readily into disputes of the other kinds.

Of those who agree that freedom is a benefit, most would also agree that it is not the *only* benefit a society may secure its members. Other benefits might include, for example, economic and military security, technological efficiency, and exemplifications

of various aesthetic and spiritual values. Once this is admitted, however, disputes of types (2) and (3) are possible. Questions can be raised as to the logical and causal relationships holding between the attainment of freedom and the attainment of these other benefits, and as to whether one could on some occasions reasonably prefer to cultivate or emphasize certain of the latter at the expense of the former. Thus, one may be led to ask: *can* anyone cultivate and emphasize freedom at the cost of realizing these other goals and values (or vice versa) and, secondly, *should* anyone ever do this? In practice, these issues are often masked by or confused with disputes about the consequences of this or that action with respect to realizing the various goals or values.

Further, any of the above disputes may stem from or turn into a dispute about what freedom *is*. The borderlines have never been easy to keep clear. But a reason for this especially worth noting at the start is that disputes about the nature of freedom are certainly historically best understood as a series of attempts by parties opposing each other on very many issues to capture for their own side the favorable attitudes attaching to the notion of freedom. It has commonly been advantageous for partisans to link the presence or absence of freedom as closely as possible to the presence or absence of those other social benefits believed to be secured or denied by the forms of social organization advocated or condemned. Each social benefit is, accordingly, treated as either a result of or a contribution to freedom, and each liability is connected somehow to the absence of freedom. This history of the matter goes far to explain how freedom came to be identified with so many different kinds of social and individual benefits, and why the status of freedom as simply one among a number of social benefits has remained unclear. The resulting flexibility of the notion of freedom, and the resulting enhancement of the value of freedom, have suited the purposes of the polemicist.

It is against this background that one should first see the issues surrounding the distinction between positive and negative freedom as two fundamentally different kinds of freedom. Nevertheless, the difficulties surrounding the distinction should not be attributed solely to the interplay of Machiavellian motives. The disputes, and indeed the distinction itself, have also been

influenced by a genuine confusion concerning the concept of freedom. The confusion results from failure to understand fully the conditions under which use of the concept of freedom is intelligible.

## II

Whenever the freedom of some agent or agents is in question, it is always freedom from some constraint or restriction on, interference with, or barrier to doing, not doing, becoming, or not becoming something.<sup>1</sup> Such freedom is thus always *of* something (an agent or agents), *from* something, *to* do, not do, become, or not become something; it is a triadic relation. Taking the format “ $x$  is (is not) free from  $y$  to do (not do, become, not become)  $z$ ,”  $x$  ranges over agents,  $y$  ranges over such “preventing conditions” as constraints, restrictions, interferences, and barriers, and  $z$  ranges over actions or conditions of character or circumstance. When reference to one of these three terms is missing in such a discussion of freedom, it should be only because the reference is thought to be understood from the context of the discussion.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, the idioms of freedom are such that this is sometimes not obvious. The claim, however, is not about what we say, but rather about the conditions under which what we say is intelligible. And, of course, it is important to notice that the claim is only about what makes talk concerning the freedom of agents intelligible. This restriction excludes from consideration, for example, some uses of “free of” and “free from”—namely, those not concerned with the freedom of agents, and where,

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<sup>1</sup> The need to elaborate in this unwieldy way arises from the absence in this paper of any discussion of the verification conditions for claims about freedom. The elaboration is designed to leave open the issues one would want to raise in such a discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Of writers on political and social freedom who have approached this view, the clearest case is Felix Oppenheim in *Dimensions of Freedom* (New York, 1961); but, while viewing social freedom as a triadic relation, he limits the ranges of the term variables so sharply as to cut one off from many issues I wish to reach. Cf. also T. D. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics* (Harmondsworth, 1953), esp. pp. 157 ff.; but see also pp. 70-72.

consequently, what is meant may be only "rid of" or "without." Thus, consideration of "The sky is now free of clouds" is excluded because this expression does not deal with agents at all; but consideration of "His record is free of blemish" and "She is free from any vice" is most probably also excluded. Doubt about these latter two hinges on whether these expressions might be thought claims about the freedom of agents; if so, then they are not excluded, but neither are they intelligible *as* claims about the freedom of agents until one is in a position to fill in the elements of the format offered above; if not, then although probably parasitic upon talk about the freedom of agents and thus perhaps viewable as figurative anyway, they fall outside the scope of this investigation.

The claim that freedom, subject to the restriction noted above, is a triadic relation can hardly be substantiated here by exhaustive examination of the idioms of freedom. But the most obviously troublesome cases—namely, those in which one's understanding of the context must in a relevant way carry past the limits of what is explicit in the idiom—may be classified roughly and illustrated as follows:

(a) *Cases where agents are not mentioned*: for example, consider any of the wide range of expressions having the form "free  $x$ " in which (i) the place of  $x$  is taken by an expression not clearly referring to an agent—as in "free society" or "free will"—or (ii) the place of  $x$  is taken by an expression clearly not referring to an agent—as in "free beer." All such cases can be understood to be concerned with the freedom of agents and, indeed, their intelligibility rests upon their being so understood; they are thus subject to the claims made above. This is fairly obvious in the cases of "free will" and "free society." The intelligibility of the free-will problem is generally and correctly thought to rest at least upon the problem's being concerned with the freedom of persons, even though the criteria for identification of the persons or "selves" whose freedom is in question have not often been made sufficiently clear.<sup>3</sup> And it is beyond question that the ex-

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, lack of clarity on just this point is probably one of the major sources of confusion in discussions of free will.

pression "free society," although of course subject to various conflicting analyses with respect to the identity of the agent(s) whose freedom is involved, is thought intelligible only because it is thought to concern the freedom of agents of some sort or other. The expression "free beer," on the other hand (to take only one of a rich class of cases some of which would have to be managed differently), is ordinarily thought intelligible because thought to refer to beer that *people* are free *from* the ordinary restrictions of the market place *to* drink without paying for it.

For an expression of another grammatical form, consider "The property is free of (or from) encumbrance." Although this involves a loose use of "property," suppose that the term refers to something like a piece of land; the claim then clearly means that *owners* of that land are free *from* certain well-known restrictions (for example, certain types of charges or liabilities consequent upon their ownership of the land) *to* use, enjoy, dispose of the land as they wish.

(b) *Cases where it is not clear what corresponds to the second term:* for example, "freedom of choice," "freedom to choose as I please." Here, the range of constraints, restrictions, and so forth, is generally clear from the context of the discussion. In political matters, legal constraints or restrictions are most often thought of; but one also sometimes finds, as in Mill's *On Liberty*, concern for constraints and interferences constituted by social pressures. It is sometimes difficult for persons to see social pressures as constraints or interferences; this will be discussed below. It is also notoriously difficult to see causal nexuses as implying constraints or restrictions on the "will" (the person?) in connection with the free-will problem. But the very fact that such difficulties are the focus of so much attention is witness to the importance of getting clear about this term of the relation before such discussions of freedom can be said to be intelligible.

One might think that references to a second term of this sort could always be eliminated by a device such as the following. Instead of saying, for example, (i) "Smith is free *from* legal restrictions on travel *to* leave the country," one could say (ii) "Smith is free *to* leave the country *because* there are no legal restrictions on his leaving." The latter would make freedom

appear to be a dyadic, rather than a triadic, relation. But we would be best advised to regard the appearance illusory, and this may be seen if one thinks a bit about the suggestion or implication of the sentence that nothing hinders or prevents Smith from leaving the country. Difficulties about this might be settled by attaching a qualifier to "free"—namely, "*legally* free." Alternatively, one could consider which, of all the things that might still hinder or prevent Smith from leaving the country (for example, has he promised someone to remain? will the responsibilities of his job keep him here? has he enough money to buy passage and, if not, why not?), could count as limitations on his freedom to leave the country; one would then be in a position to determine whether the claim had been misleading or false. In either case, however, the devices adopted would reveal that our understanding of what has been said hinged upon our understanding of the range of obstacles or constraints from which Smith had been claimed to be free.

(c) *Cases where it is not clear what corresponds to the third term:* for example, "freedom from hunger" ("want," "fear," "disease," and so forth). One quick but not very satisfactory way of dealing with such expressions is to regard them as figurative, or at least not really concerned with anybody's freedom; thus, being free from hunger would be simply being rid of, or without, hunger—as a sky may be free of clouds (compare the discussion of this above). Alternatively, one might incline toward regarding hunger as a barrier of some sort, and claim that a person free *from* hunger is free *to* be well fed or to do or do well the various things he could not do or do well if hungry. Yet again, and more satisfactorily, one could turn to the context of the initial bit of Rooseveltian rhetoric and there find reason to treat the expression as follows. Suppose that hunger is a feeling and that someone *seeks* hunger; he is on a diet and the hunger feeling reassures him that he is losing weight.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, suppose that hunger is a bodily condition and that someone seeks it; he is on a Gandhi-style hunger strike. In either case, Roosevelt or his fellow orators might have wanted a world in which these people were free

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this example to Professor James Pratt.

from hunger; but this surely does not mean that they wanted a world in which people were not hungry despite a wish to be so. They wanted, rather, a world in which people were not victims of hunger they did not seek; that is, they wanted a world without barriers keeping people hungry despite efforts to avoid hunger—a world in which people would be free *from* barriers constituted by various specifiable agricultural, economic, and political conditions *to* get enough food to prevent hunger. This view of “freedom from hunger” not only makes perfectly good and historically accurate sense out of the expression, but also conforms to the view that freedom is a triadic relation.

In other politically important idioms the *range* of the third term is not always utterly clear. For example, does freedom of religion include freedom *not* to worship? Does freedom of speech include *all* speech no matter what its content, manner of delivery, or the circumstances of its delivery? Such matters, however, raise largely historical questions or questions to be settled by political decision; they do not throw doubt on the need for a third term.

That the intelligibility of talk concerned with the freedom of agents rests in the end upon an understanding of freedom as a triadic relation is what many persons distinguishing between positive and negative freedom apparently fail to see or see clearly enough. Evidence of such failure or, alternatively, invitation to it is found in the simple but conventional characterization of the difference between the two kinds of freedom as the difference between “freedom from” and “freedom to”—a characterization suggesting that freedom could be either of two dyadic relations. This characterization, however, cannot distinguish two genuinely different kinds of freedom; it can serve only to emphasize one or the other of two features of *every* case of the freedom of agents. Consequently, anyone who argues that freedom *from* is the “only” freedom, or that freedom *to* is the “truest” freedom, or that one is “more important than” the other, cannot be taken as having said anything both straightforward and sensible about two distinct kinds of freedom. He can, at most, be said to be attending to, or emphasizing the importance of only one part of what is always present in any case of freedom.

Unfortunately, even if this basis of distinction between positive



and negative freedom as two distinct kinds or concepts of freedom is shown to collapse, one has not gone very far in understanding the issues separating those philosophers or ideologies commonly said to utilize one or the other of them. One has, however, dissipated one of the main confusions blocking understanding of these issues. In recognizing that freedom is always *both* freedom from something and freedom to do or become something, one is provided with a means of making sense out of interminable and poorly defined controversies concerning, for example, when a person really is free, why freedom is important, and on what its importance depends. As these, in turn, are matters on which the distinction between positive and negative freedom has turned, one is given also a means of managing sensibly the writings appearing to accept or to be based upon that distinction.

### III

The key to understanding lies in recognition of precisely how differing styles of answer to the question "When are persons free?" could survive agreement that freedom is a triadic relation. The differences would be rooted in differing views on the ranges of the term variables—that is, on the ("true") identities of the agents whose freedom is in question, on what counts as an obstacle to or interference with the freedom of such agents, or on the range of what such agents might or might not be free to do or become.<sup>5</sup> Although perhaps not always obvious or dramatic, such differences could lead to vastly different accounts of when persons are free. Furthermore, differences on one of these matters might or might not be accompanied by differences on either of the others. There is thus a rich stock of ways in which such accounts might diverge, and a rich stock of possible foci of argument.

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<sup>5</sup> They might also be rooted in differing views on the verification conditions for claims about freedom. This issue would be important to discuss in a full-scale treatment of freedom but, as already mentioned, it is not discussed in this paper. It plays, at most, an easily eliminable role in the distinction between positive and negative freedom.

It is therefore crucial, when dealing with accounts of when persons are free, to insist on getting *quite* clear on what each writer considers to be the ranges of these term variables. Such insistence will reveal where the differences between writers are, and will provide a starting point for rewarding consideration of what might justify these differences.

The distinction between positive and negative freedom has, however, stood in the way of this approach. It has encouraged us to see differences in accounts of freedom as resulting from differences in concepts of freedom. This in turn has encouraged the wrong sorts of questions. We have been tempted to ask such questions as "Well, who *is* right? Whose concept of freedom is the correct one?" or "Which *kind* of freedom do we really want after all?" Such questions will not help reveal the fundamental issues separating major writers on freedom from each other, no matter *how* the writers are arranged into "camps." It would be far better to insist that the same concept of freedom is operating throughout, and that the differences, rather than being about what *freedom* is, are for example about what persons are, and about what can count as an obstacle to or interference with the freedom of persons so conceived.

The appropriateness of this insistence is easily seen when one examines prevailing characterizations of the differences between "positive" and "negative" freedom. Once the alleged difference between "freedom from" and "freedom to" has been disallowed (as it must be; see above), the most persuasive of the remaining characterizations appear to be as follows:<sup>6</sup>

1. Writers adhering to the concept of "negative" freedom hold that only the *presence* of something can render a person unfree; writers adhering to the concept of "positive" freedom hold that the *absence* of something may also render a person unfree.

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<sup>6</sup> Yet other attempts at characterization have been offered—most recently and notably by Sir Isaiah Berlin in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford, 1958). Berlin also offers the second and (more or less) the third of the characterizations cited here.

2. The former hold that a person is free to do  $x$  just in case *nothing due to arrangements made by other persons* stops him from doing  $x$ ; the latter adopt no such restriction.

3. The former hold that the agents whose freedom is in question (for example, "persons," "men") are, in effect, identifiable as Anglo-American law would identify "natural" (as opposed to "artificial") persons; the latter sometimes hold quite different views as to how these agents are to be identified (see below).

The most obvious thing to be said about these characterizations, of course, is that appeal to them provides at best an excessively crude justification of the conventional classification of writers into opposing camps.<sup>7</sup> When one presses on the alleged points of difference, they have a tendency to break down, or at least to become less dramatic than they at first seemed.<sup>8</sup> As should

<sup>7</sup> A fair picture of that classification is provided by Berlin (*op. cit.*) who cites and quotes from various writers in such a way as to suggest that they are in one camp or the other. Identified in this manner as adherents of "negative" freedom, one finds Occam, Erasmus, Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Constant, J. S. Mill, Tocqueville, Jefferson, Burke, Paine. Among adherents of "positive" freedom one finds Plato, Epictetus, St. Ambrose, Montesquieu, Spinoza, Kant, Herder, Rousseau, Hegel, Fichte, Marx, Bukharin, Comte, Carlyle, T. H. Green, Bradley, Bosanquet.

<sup>8</sup> For example, consider No. 1. Perhaps there is something to it, but the following cautionary remarks should be made. (a) The so-called adherents of "negative" freedom might very well accept the *absence* of something as an obstacle to freedom. Consider a man who is not free because, although unguarded, he has been locked in chains. Is he unfree because of the *presence* of the locked chains, or is he unfree because he *lacks* a key? Are adherents of "negative" freedom prohibited from giving the latter answer? (b) Even purported adherents of "positive" freedom are not always straightforward in their acceptance of the lack of something as an obstacle to freedom. They sometimes swing toward attributing the absence of freedom to the presence of certain conditions causally connected with the lack, absence, or deprivation mentioned initially. For example, it may be said that a person who was unable to qualify for a position owing to lack of training (and thus not free to accept or "have" it) was prevented from accepting the position by a social, political, economic, or educational "system" the workings of which resulted in his being bereft of training.

Also, in so far as this swing is made, our view of the difference mentioned in No. 2 may become fuzzy; for adherents of "positive" freedom might be thought at bottom to regard those "preventing conditions" counting as in-

not be surprising, the patterns of agreement and disagreement on these several points are in fact either too diverse or too indistinct to support any clearly justifiable arrangement of major writers into two camps. The trouble is not merely that some writers do not fit too well where they have been placed; it is rather that writers who are purportedly the very models of membership in one camp or the other (for example, Locke, the Marxists) do not fit very well where they have been placed<sup>9</sup>—thus suggesting that the whole system of dichotomous classification is futile and, even worse, conducive to distortion of important views on freedom.

But, even supposing that there were something to the classification and to the justification for it in terms of the above three points of difference, what then? The differences are of two kinds. They concern (a) the (“true”) identities of the agents whose freedom is in question, and (b) what is to count as an “obstacle” or “barrier” to, “restriction” on, or “interference” with the freedom of such agents. They are thus clearly about the ranges of two of the three term variables mentioned earlier. It would be a mistake to see them in any other way. We are likely to make this mistake, however, and obscure the path of rewarding argument, if we present them as differences concerning what “freedom” means.

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fringements of freedom as most often if not always circumstances due to human arrangements. This might be true even when, as we shall see is sometimes the case, the focus is on the role of “irrational passions and appetites.” The presence or undisciplined character of these may be treated as resulting from the operation of certain specifiable social, educational, or moral institutions or arrangements. (Berlin, e.g., seems to acknowledge this with respect to the Marxists. See Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 8, n. 1, and the text at this point.) Thus one might in the end be able to say no more than this: that the adherents of “negative” freedom are on the whole more inclined to require that the *intention* of the arrangements in question have been to coerce, compel, or deprive persons of this or that. The difference here, however, is not very striking.

<sup>9</sup> Locke said: “liberty . . . is the power a man has to do or forbear doing any particular action according . . . as he himself wills it” (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, ch. xxi, sec. 15). He also said, of law, “that ill deserves the name of confinement which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices,” and “the end of law is, not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom” (*Second Treatise of Government*, sec. 57). He also sometimes spoke of a man’s consent as though it were the same as the consent of the majority.

Why doesn’t all this put him in the camp of “positive” freedom vis-à-vis at least points (2) and (3) above? Concerning the Marxists, see n. 8, *supra*.

Consider the following. Suppose that we have been raised in the so-called “libertarian” tradition (roughly characterized as that of “negative” freedom). There would be nothing unusual to us, and perhaps even nothing troubling, in conventional accounts of what the adherent of negative freedom treats as the ranges of these variables.

1. He is purported to count persons just as we do—to point to living human bodies and say of each (and only of each), “There’s a person.” Precisely what we ordinarily call persons. (And if he is troubled by nonviable fetuses, and so forth, so are we.)

2. He is purported to mean much what we mean by “obstacle,” and so forth, though this changes with changes in our views of what can be attributed to arrangements made by human beings, and also with variations in the importance we attach to consenting to rules, practices, and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

3. He is purported to have quite “ordinary” views on what a person may or may not be free to do or become. The actions are sometimes suggested in fairly specific terms—for example, free to have a home, raise a family, “rise to the top.” But, on the whole, he is purported to talk of persons being free or not free “to do what they want” or (perhaps) “to express themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the criteria for determining what a person wants to do are those we customarily use, or perhaps even the most naïve and unsophisticated of them—for example, what a person wants to do is determined by what he *says* he wants to do, or by what he manifestly *tries* to do, or even *does* do.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The point of “consent theories” of political obligation sometimes seems to be to hide from ourselves the fact that a rule of unanimity is an unworkable basis for a system of government and that government does involve coercion. We seem, however, not really to have made up our minds about this.

<sup>11</sup> These last ways of putting it are appreciably different. When a person who would otherwise count as a libertarian speaks of persons as free or not free to express themselves, his position as a libertarian may muddy a bit. One may feel invited to wonder which of the multitudinous wants of a given individual *are* expressive of his nature—that is, which are such that their fulfillment is conducive to the expression of his “self.”

<sup>12</sup> The possibility of conflicts among these criteria has not been much considered by so-called libertarians.

In contrast, much might trouble us in the accounts of the so-called adherents of “positive” freedom.

1. They sometimes do not count, as the agent whose freedom is being considered, what inheritors of our tradition would unhesitatingly consider to be a “person.” Instead, they occasionally engage in what has been revealingly but pejoratively called “the retreat to the inner citadel”;<sup>13</sup> the agent in whose freedom they are interested is identified as the “real” or the “rational” or the “moral” person who is somehow sometimes hidden within, or has his seed contained within, the living human body. Sometimes, however, rather than a retreat to such an “inner citadel,” or sometimes in addition to such a retreat, there is an expansion of the limits of “person” such that the institutions and members, the histories and futures of the communities in which the living human body is found are considered to be inextricable parts of the “person.”

These expansions or contractions of the criteria for identification of persons may seem unwarranted to us. Whether they are so, however, depends upon the strength of the arguments offered in support of the helpfulness of regarding persons in these ways while discussing freedom. For example, the retreat to the “inner citadel” may be initiated simply by worries about which, of all the things we want, will give us lasting satisfaction—a view of our interests making it possible to see the surge of impulse or passion as an obstacle to the attainment of what we “really want.” And the expansion of the limits of the “self” to include our families, cultures, nations, or races may be launched by awareness that our “self” is to some extent the product of these associations; by awareness that our identification of our interests may be influenced by our beliefs concerning ways in which our destinies are tied to the destinies of our families, nations, and so forth; by the way we see tugs and stresses upon those associations as tugs and stresses upon us; and by the ways we see ourselves and *identify* ourselves as officeholders in such associations with the rights and obligations of such offices. This expansion,

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<sup>13</sup> See Berlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 17 ff. (though Berlin significantly admits also that this move can be made by adherents of negative freedom; see p. 19).

in turn, makes it possible for us to see the infringement of the autonomy of our associations as infringement on our freedom.

Assessing the strengths of the various positions taken on these matters requires a painstaking investigation and evaluation of the arguments offered—something that can hardly be launched within the confines of this paper. But what should be observed is that this set of seemingly radical departures by adherents of positive freedom from the ways “we” ordinarily identify persons does not provide us with any reason whatever to claim that a different concept of *freedom* is involved (one might as well say that the shift from “The apple is to the left of the orange” to “The seeds of the apple are to the left of the seeds of the orange” changes what “to the left of” means). Furthermore, that claim would draw attention away from precisely what we should focus on; it would lead us to focus on the wrong concept—namely, “freedom” instead of “person.” Only by insisting at least provisionally that all the writers have the same concept of freedom can one see clearly and keep sharply focused the obvious and extremely important differences among them concerning the concept of “person.”

2. Similarly, adherents of so-called “positive” freedom purportedly differ from “us” on what counts as an obstacle. Will *this* difference be revealed adequately if we focus on supposed differences in the concept of “freedom”? Not likely. Given differences on what a person is, differences in what counts as an obstacle or interference are not surprising, of course, since what could count as an obstacle to the activity of a person identified in one way might not possibly count as an obstacle to persons identified in other ways. But the differences concerning “obstacle” and so forth are probably not due solely to differences concerning “person.” If, for example, we so-called adherents of negative freedom, in order to count something as a preventing condition, ordinarily require that it can be shown a result of arrangements made by human beings, and our “opponents” do not require this, why not? On the whole, perhaps, the latter are saying this: if one is concerned with social, political, and economic policies, and with how these policies can remove or increase human misery, it is quite irrelevant whether difficulties in the



way of the policies are or are not *due to* arrangements made by human beings. The only question is whether the difficulties can be removed by human arrangements, and at what cost. This view, seen as an attack upon the "artificiality" of a borderline for distinguishing human freedom from other human values, does not seem inherently unreasonable; a close look at the positions and arguments seems called for.<sup>14</sup> But again, the issues and arguments will be misfocused if we fail to see them as about the range of a term variable of a single triadic relation (freedom). Admittedly, we *could* see some aspects of the matter (those where the differences do not follow merely from differences in what is thought to be the agent whose freedom is in question) as amounting to disagreements about what is meant by "freedom." But there is no decisive reason for doing so, and this move surely threatens to obscure the socially and politically significant issues raised by the argument suggested above.

3. Concerning treatment of the third term by purported adherents of positive freedom, perhaps enough has already been

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<sup>14</sup> The libertarian position concerning the borderline is well expressed by Berlin in the following passage on the struggle of colonial peoples: "Is the struggle for higher status, the wish to escape from an inferior position, to be called a struggle for liberty? Is it mere pedantry to confine this word to the main ('negative') senses discussed above, or are we, as I suspect, in danger of calling any adjustment of his social situation favored by a human being an increase of his liberty, and will this not render this term so vague and distended as to make it virtually useless" (*op. cit.*, p. 44)? One may surely agree with Berlin that there may be something of a threat here; but one may also agree with him when, in the passage immediately following, he inclines to give back what he has just taken away: "And yet we cannot simply dismiss this case as a mere confusion of the notion of freedom with those of status, or solidarity, or fraternity, or equality, or some combination of these. For the craving for status is, in certain respects very close to the desire to be an independent agent." What first needs explaining, of course, is why colonial peoples might believe themselves freer under the rule of local tyrants than under the rule of (possibly) benevolent colonial administrations. Berlin tends to dismiss this as a simple confusion of a desire for freedom with a hankering after status and recognition. What need more careful evaluation than he gives them are (a) the strength of reasons for regarding rule by one's racial and religious peers as self-rule and (b) the strength of claims about freedom based on the consequences of consent or authorization for one's capacity to speak of "self-rule" (cf. Hobbes's famous ch. xvi in *Leviathan*, "Of Persons and Things Personated"). Cf. n. 10, *supra*.



said to suggest that they tend to emphasize conditions of character rather than actions, and to suggest that, as with "us" too, the range of character conditions and actions focused on may influence or be influenced by what is thought to count as agent and by what is thought to count as preventing condition. Thus, though something more definite would have to be said about the matter eventually, at least some contact with the issues previously raised might be expected in arguments about the range of this variable.

It is important to observe here and throughout, however, that close agreement between two writers in their understanding of the range of one of the variables does not make *inevitable* like agreement on the ranges of the others. Indeed, we have gone far enough to see that the kinds of issues arising in determination of the ranges are sufficiently diverse to make such simple correlations unlikely. Precisely this renders attempts to arrange writers on freedom into two opposing camps so distorted and ultimately futile. There is too rich a stock of ways in which accounts of freedom diverge.

If we are to manage these divergences sensibly, we must focus our attention on each of these variables and on differences in views as to their ranges. Until we do this, we will not see clearly the issues which have in fact been raised, and thus will not see clearly what needs arguing. In view of this need, it is both clumsy and misleading to try to sort out writers as adherents of this or that "kind" or "concept" of freedom. We would be far better off to insist that they all have the same concept of freedom (as a triadic relation)—thus putting ourselves in a position to notice how, and inquire fruitfully into why, they identify differently what can serve as agent, preventing condition, and action or state of character vis-à-vis issues of freedom.

#### IV

If the importance of this approach to discussion of freedom has been generally overlooked, it is because social and political philosophers have, with dreary regularity, made the mistake of trying to answer the unadorned question, "When are men free?" or, alternatively, "When are men *really* free?" These

questions *invite* confusion and misunderstanding, largely because of their tacit presumption that persons can be free or not free *simpliciter*.

One might suppose that, strictly speaking, a person could be free *simpliciter* only if there were no interference from which he was not free, and nothing that he was not free to do or become. On this view, however, and on acceptance of common views as to what counts as a person, what counts as interference, and what actions or conditions of character may meaningfully be said to be free or not free, all disputes concerning whether or not men in societies are ever free would be inane. Concerning such settings, where the use and threat of coercion are distinctively present, there would *always* be an air of fraud or hocus-pocus about claims that men are free—just like that.

Yet one might hold that men can be free (*simpliciter*) even in society because certain things which ordinarily are counted as interferences or barriers are not actually so, or because certain kinds of behavior ordinarily thought to be either free or unfree do not, for some reason, “count.” Thus one might argue that at least in certain (conceivable) societies there is no activity in which men in that society are not free to engage, and no possible restriction or barrier from which they are not free.

The burden of such an argument should now be clear. Everything *from* which a person in that society might ordinarily be considered unfree must be shown not actually an interference or barrier (or not a relevant one), and everything which a person in that society might ordinarily be considered not free to *do* or *become* must be shown irrelevant to the issue of freedom. (Part of the argument in either or both cases might be that the “true” identity of the person in question is not what it has been thought to be.)

Pitfalls may remain for attempts to evaluate such arguments. For example, one may uncover tendencies to telescope questions concerning the *legitimacy* of interference into questions concerning genuineness *as* interference.<sup>15</sup> One may also find telescoping of questions concerning the *desirability* of certain modes of behavior

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. nn. 10 and 14, *supra*.

or character states into questions concerning the *possibility* of being either free or not free to engage in those modes of behavior or become that kind of person.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, a demand for specification of the term variables helps pinpoint such problems, as well as forestalling the confusions obviously encouraged by failure to make the specifications.

Perhaps, however, the claim that certain men are free *simpliciter* is merely elliptical for the claim that they are free in every important respect, or in most important respects, or "on the whole." Nevertheless, the point still remains that when this ellipsis is filled in, the reasonableness of asking both "What are they free from?" and "What are they free to do or become?" becomes apparent. Only when one gets straightforward answers to these questions is he in any position to judge whether the men *are* free as claimed. Likewise, only then will he be in a position to judge the *value* or *importance* of the freedom(s) in question. It is important to know, for example, whether a man is free from legal restrictions to raise a family. But of course social or economic "arrangements" may be such that he still could not raise a family if he wanted to. Thus, merely to say that he is free to raise a family, when what is meant is only that he is free from legal restrictions to raise a family, is to invite misunderstanding. Further, the *range* of activities he may or may not be free from this or that to engage in, or the range of character states he may or may not be free to develop, should make a difference in our evaluations of his situation and of his society; but this too is not called for strongly enough when one asks simply, "Is the man free?" Only when we determine what the men in question are free from, and what they are free to do or become, will we be in a position to estimate the value for human happiness and fulfilment of being free from *that* (whatever *it* is), to do *the other thing* (whatever *it* is). Only then will we be in a position to make rational evaluations of the relative merits of societies with regard to freedom.

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<sup>16</sup> E.g., is it logically possible for a person to be free to do something immoral? Cf. Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 10, n.

## V

The above remarks can be tied again to the controversy concerning negative and positive freedom by considering the following argument by friends of "negative" freedom. Freedom is always and necessarily *from* restraint; thus, in so far as the adherents of positive freedom speak of persons being made free *by means of* restraint, they cannot be talking about freedom.

The issues raised by this argument (which is seldom stated more fully than here) can be revealed by investigating what might be done to make good sense out of the claim that, for example, Smith is (or can be) made free by restraining (constraining, coercing) him.<sup>17</sup> Use of the format of specifications recommended above reveals two major possibilities:

1. Restraining Smith by means *a* from doing *b* produces a situation in which he is now able to do *c* because restraint *d* is lifted. He is thereby, by means of restraint *a*, made free from *d* to do *c*, although he can no longer do *b*. For example, suppose that Smith, who always walks to where he needs to go, lives in a tiny town where there have been no pedestrian crosswalks and where automobiles have had right of way over pedestrians. Suppose further that a series of pedestrian crosswalks is instituted along with the regulation that pedestrians must use only these walks when crossing, but that while in these walks pedestrians have right of way over automobiles. The regulation restrains Smith (he can no longer legally cross streets where he pleases) but it also frees him (while in crosswalks he no longer has a duty to defer to automobile traffic). Using the schema above, the regulation (*a*) restrains Smith from crossing streets wherever he likes (*b*), but at the same time is such as to (make it practicable to) give him restricted right of way (*c*) over automobile traffic. The regulation (*a*) thus gives him restricted right of way (*c*) because it lifts the rule (*d*) giving automobiles general right of way over pedestrians.

This interpretation of the assertion that Smith can be made free

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<sup>17</sup> This presumes that the prospect of freeing Smith by restraining *someone else* would be unproblematic even for the friends of negative freedom.

by restraining him is straightforward enough. It raises problems only if one supposes that persons must be either free or not free *simpliciter*, and that the claim in question is that Smith is made free *simpliciter*. But there is no obvious justification for either of these suppositions.

If these suppositions *are* made, however, then the following interpretation may be appropriate:

2. Smith is being "restrained" only in the ordinary acceptance of that term; actually, he is not being restrained at all. He is being helped to do what he really wants to do, or what he *would* want to do if he were reasonable (moral, prudent, or such like); compare Locke's words: "that ill deserves the name of confinement which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices."<sup>18</sup> Because of the "constraint" put upon him, a *genuine* constraint that *was* upon him (for example, ignorance, passion, the intrusions of others) is lifted, and he is free from the latter to do what he really wishes (or would wish if . . .).

This interpretation is hardly straightforward, but the claim that it embodies is nevertheless arguable; Plato argues it in the *Republic* and implies such a claim in the *Gorgias*. Furthermore, insistence upon the format of specifications recommended above can lead one to see clearly the kind of arguments needed to support the claim. For example, if a person is to be made free, whether by means of restraint or otherwise, there must be something *from* which he is made free. This must be singled out. Its character may not always be clear; for example, in Locke's discussion the confinement from which one is liberated by law is perhaps the constraint produced by the arbitrary uncontrolled actions of one's neighbors, or perhaps it is the "constraint" arising from one's own ignorance or passion, or perhaps it is both of these. If only the former, then the specification is unexceptionable enough; that kind of constraint is well within the range of what is ordinarily thought to be constraint. If the latter, however, then some further argument is needed; one's own ignorance and passion are at least not unquestionably within the range of what can

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<sup>18</sup> *The Second Treatise of Government*, sec. 57. As is remarked below, however, the proper interpretation of this passage is not at all clear.

restrain him and limit his freedom. The required argument may attempt to show that ignorance and passion prevent persons from doing what they want to do, or what they “really” want to do, or what they *would* want to do if . . . . The idea would be to promote seeing the removal of ignorance and passion, or at least the control of their effects, as the removal or control of something preventing a person from doing as he wishes, really wishes, or would wish, and so forth, and thus, plausibly, an increase of that person’s freedom.

Arguments concerning the “true” identity of the person in question and what *can* restrict such a person’s freedom are of course important here and should be pushed further than the above discussion suggests. For the present, however, one need observe only that they are met again when one presses for specification of the full range of what, on interpretation (2), Smith is made free to *do*. Apparently, he is made free to do as he wishes, really wishes, or *would* wish if . . . . But, quite obviously, there is also something that he is *prima facie* not free to do; otherwise, there would be no point in declaring that he was being made free *by means of* restraint. One may discover how this difficulty is met by looking again to the arguments by which the claimer seeks to establish that something which at first appears to be a restraint is not actually a restraint at all. Two main lines may be found here: (a) that the activities being “restrained” are so unimportant or minor (relative, perhaps, to what is gained) that they are not worth counting, or (b) that the activities are such that no one could ever want (or really want, and so forth) to engage in them. If the activities in question are so unimportant as to be negligible, the restraints that prevent one from engaging in them may be also “not worthy of consideration”; if, on the other hand, the activities are ones that no one would conceivably freely choose to engage in, then it might indeed be thought “idle” to consider our inability to do them as a restriction upon our freedom.

Admittedly, the persons actually making the principal claim under consideration may have been confused, may not have seen all these alternatives of interpretation, and so forth. The intention here is not to say what such persons did mean when

uttering the claims, but only more or less plausibly what they might have meant. The interpretations provide the main lines for the latter. They also provide a clear picture of what needs to be done in order to assess the worth of the claims in each case; for, of course, no pretense is being made here that such arguments are always or even very often ultimately convincing.

Interpretation (2) clearly provides the most difficult and interesting problems. One may analyze and discuss these problems by considering them to be raised by attempts to answer the following four questions:

- (a) What is to count as an interference with the freedom of persons?
- (b) What is to count as an action that persons might reasonably be said to be either free or not free to perform?
- (c) What is to count as a legitimate interference with the freedom of persons?
- (d) What actions are persons best left free to do?

As was mentioned above, there is a tendency to telescope (c) into (a), and to telescope (d) into (b). It was also noted that (c) and (d) are not distinct questions: they are logically related in so far as criteria of legitimacy are connected to beliefs about what is best or most desirable. (a) and (b) are also closely related in that an answer to one will affect what can reasonably be considered an answer to the other. The use of these questions as guides in the analysis and understanding of discussions of freedom should not, therefore, be expected to produce always a neat ordering of the discussions. But it *will* help further to delimit the alternatives of reasonable interpretation.

## VI

In the end, then, discussions of the freedom of agents can be fully intelligible and rationally assessed only after the specification of each term of this triadic relation has been made or at least understood. The principal claim made here has been that insistence upon this single "concept" of freedom puts us in a position

GERALD C. MACCALLUM, JR.

to see the interesting and important ranges of issues separating the philosophers who write about freedom in such different ways, and the ideologies that treat freedom so differently. These issues are obscured, if not hidden, when we suppose that the important thing is that the fascists, communists, and socialists on the one side, for example, have a different concept of freedom from that of the "libertarians" on the other. These issues are also hidden, of course, by the facile assumption that the adherents on one side or the other are never sincere.

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