



IDEA OF FREEDOM IN PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOMSⁱ

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Abstract:

In this article, I will explore the issue of whether it is coherent to say that one person has more freedom than another by considering negative and positive freedom traditions. First, I will briefly describe the notion of negative and positive freedom. Second, I will begin to make a connection between notions of liberty and one agent having more freedom than another. Third, I will outline the inadequacy of the negative tradition, and then I will discuss the necessity of positive tradition. It is concluded that some notion of positive liberty is needed to make coherent sense of the claim that persons can vary in degree of liberty. However, owing to social contract issues, I conclude that both conceptions are needed.

Keywords: idea of freedom, freedom, negative freedom, positive freedom, liberty

Öz:

Bu çalışmada, bir kişinin diğerinden daha fazla özgürlüğe sahip olduğunu söylemenin tutarlı olup olmadığı, felsefedeki negatif ve pozitif özgürlük kavramları ele alınarak incelenmiştir. Bu bağlamda ilk olarak negatif ve pozitif özgürlük kavramları kısaca açıklanmıştır. Ardından, özgürlük kavramları ile bir kişinin diğerinden daha fazla özgürlüğe sahip olması arasında bir bağlantı kurulmuştur. Son olarak, felsefedeki negatif özgürlük kavramının neden yetersiz olduğunun ana hatları çizilmiş ve ardından pozitif geleneğin gerekliliği ele alınıp tartışılmıştır. Bu çalışmada, kişilerin özgürlük ve bağımsızlık derecesine göre çeşitlilik gösterebileceği iddiasını tutarlı bir şekilde anlamlandırmak için pozitif özgürlük kavramına ihtiyaç olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır. Bununla birlikte bu çalışmada, toplum sözleşmesi kavramında yer alan birtakım sorunlar

ⁱ NEGATİF VE POZİTİF ÖZGÜRLÜKLER BAĞLAMINDA FELSEFEDE ÖZGÜRLÜK DÜŞÜNÇESİ

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nedeniyle, her iki özgürlük kavramın da özgürlük düşüncesi için gerekli olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: özgürlük düşüncesi, özgürlük, negatif özgürlük, pozitif özgürlük, bağımsızlık

1. Introduction

If we consider the question of what is freedom, one challenge when analysing freedom is that there are many different conceptions of what it is to be free. The two main traditions in this regard are *negative* and *positive* conceptions of freedom. At this point, I want to make a brief characterisation of negative and positive traditions, but I will go into more detail later.

The “negative” tradition understand freedom as the absence of external obstacles. In general, freedom is based on no person or group interfering with my actions. The limits of political freedom in this sense are where a person can move without any external obstruction by others. If I encounter a restriction laid down by others, I am (in this regard) not free. For a negative liberty theorist, persons can take decisions without encountering any interference, (consistent with external things such as other people's freedom). The negative tradition focuses on individual-oriented freedom, and no one agent is a source of coercion against liberty. The notion of coercion can contain any external causes such as state authority, laws, moral principles, and so on. We can increase these examples, but I want to focus on political effects when discussing having more freedom, so state authority and laws are good examples here. For example, let us think the Galileo's scientific attitude and the Church's dogmas about astronomy. The Church imposed Ptolemy's geocentric model, but Galileo believed that it was a wrong theory. So, the decision of Inquisition to ban of the publication of Galileo's ideas represented a coercive act. Of course, Galileo could improve and teach his ideas as long as having ability to do these actions. So, he had freedom to teach a scientific idea, but he did not have freedom to teach Copernican heliocentric model, because he was prevented. So, (intuitively) he was less free due to coercion.

We have given an example of coercion by looking at Galileo. However, it serves also to say what coercion is not. Berlin stated that:

“If I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, or cannot understand the darker pages of Hegel, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced.” ([Berlin, 1969], p3)

So, we can say that coercion is not the same notion as that of inability. In other words, Galileo had an ability to teach a scientific theory, but he was banned from exercising this ability.

I will now explain “positive freedom”. This type of freedom is based on a person's own specific activities and will:

“It is useful to think of the difference between the two concepts in terms of the difference between factors that are external and factors that are internal to the agent. While theorists of negative freedom are primarily interested in the degree to which individuals or groups suffer interference from external bodies, theorists of positive freedom are more attentive to the internal factors affecting the degree to which individuals or groups act autonomously.” ([Carter, 2012], p4)

So, positive freedom is based on having a power that I able to perform something, or I am capable of doing something. Moreover, when I state that I should be free, it means that I should not be prevented to do something by my *internal* limits such as physical and mental reasons. For the positive liberty theorist, we understand individual freedom as not based solely on external factors.

Furthermore, Berlin made several notable claims about “positive freedom”:

“The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object...” ([Berlin, 1969], p8)

In this tradition, if individuals want to build their own best conditions and protect themselves from their external obstacles, negative freedom is not enough. Therefore, individuals at the same time should have an opportunity to perform what they desire. At this stage, increases or decreases in the amount of my individual freedom depends on having a capable of doing something by getting rid of internal effects, in other words ‘being an instrument of my own’.

2. The Characterisation of Liberty through Negative Freedom

After describing what the negative and positive liberties are by considering external and internal obstacles, we can mention the characterisation of liberty by referring negative freedom. The boundaries of freedom in this sense are the area where I can move without any external obstruction by others. For example, if I encounter a restriction laid down by others, I am unfree in this respect. In this case we should ask what the things are that make us free, or what the obstacles are against our freedom. The case of Galileo is useful here. In this case, the question should be asked on what basis we can measure the quantity of freedom, and the sense in which Galileo was ‘less free’. However, degree of freedom seems difficult to measure with a definitive judgment. In this context, it is also necessary to look at Gokalp's views on what freedom means to people:

“Human freedom as a right is the inherent, essential and inalienable right of man and provides within the framework of knowledge a person possesses. Freedom can be described as a situation of behaving of people as a moral agent according to their own preferences and

rational decisions. Selection is a voluntary act and takes place within the framework of knowledge of person. Making a decision is to consider the preferences and this process requires formal reasoning. Selection process is to decide taking into account to the others. This means that to put one's self to someone else. It is the discrimination of feelings of self and others. This is not only to think through and act on it. Whatever the outcome of the action is the person had done it his own free will. If you choose, there is also your responsibility.” ([Gokalp, 2012], p478)

This is especially so given different kinds of liberty. Consider the following example from Garnett:

“I can only get to the park by bus, and that there are two buses I can take, the 12 or the 88. They take different routes but are equally efficient means of travel. Plausibly, I am at liberty to go to the park if I have either the liberty to take the 12 to the park or the liberty to take the 88 to the park. If I am banned from taking the 12, but can still take the 88, I remain at liberty to go to the park. Thus, the liberty to go to the park requires merely the disjunction of more specific liberties: intuitively, I am at liberty to go to the park if there is at least one way I can get there. Let me call this ‘disjunctive liberty’” ([Garnett, 2007], p2)

In this case, we can go to the park at least via one bus even if we have no right to take another bus. However, we cannot say that we have total freedom in terms of movement here because we are banned from one of the two options. In this case, my positive freedom of movement is infringed, because I am banned to use 12 although I can use the 88. So, I cannot do what I desired. At this point, my taking decision is my positive liberty, and travelling without facing any obstacles is my negative freedom.

There is a separate phenomenon occurring here, that of *disjunctive liberty*. With respect to the liberty of going to the park, I still possess this liberty on the above example. In this way, though my liberty is restricted in the sense that I am prevented from taking a specific bus, I still have the liberty to go to the park. My liberty to go to the park, depends on a *disjunction* of more specific liberties. This will be important for analysing negative liberty in the next section.

It seems as if there is still the opportunity to go to the park by taking 88, but on the other hand, this is not enough for negative tradition, which holds that people can do anything whatever they want. In this case, we are faced with a coercion here when we have to take the 88, because an external obstacle does not allow to us taking 12. So, this situation is contrary to the negative tradition. In this case, we can say very clearly that we are not as free as other people if they are not banned from using the 12. On the other hand, we have at least one opportunity to go to the park. So, we should discuss how we can understand these differences in liberty.

3. The Findings about whether Negative Freedom Allows for Measuring Freedom

According to negative liberty in political meaning, “having *more freedom*” is based on there being fewer restrictions from authority. At this point, we should analyse what it *means* to encounter an external obstacle.

In general, when we consider the meaning of external obstacles on the negative tradition, we can begin by considering a state of nature. If we consider a way of life which does not contain any rules, people have an infinity of actions they can perform. Even if they have a limit in terms of imagination, they have an opportunity to perform without facing an external obstacle. However, there are limits on these actions; if everyone does as he or she wishes, this may lead to the violence.

In this context, let us remember the famous dictum of Hobbes that “*man is wolf to man*”. In fact, Hobbes used this metaphor for defending the monarchy. According to him, people should give up all their situations in terms of being free, and these freeness should be assigned to the king with a social contract. For Hobbes, if freedom is left to the people's hands, it turns into something dangerous, and this situation could create chaos. He uses “*wolf*” to describe people in nature, because people who have unlimited freedom can become mercilessly selfish which causes harm to the right to life such as violence and intent to kill. However, people strike a balance to provide their own security, because security of life is common interest for each human. When transferring freedom to the sovereign, people expect from him to meet their security in the best way. This is possible only with the monarchy for Hobbes. So, this situation shows the need for a social contract.

If we come back to negative liberty again, its concept of having more freedom contains that minimum authority effects and maximum freedom for people. So, if we agreed on a social contract, this contract should be aimed at ensuring individual rights, civil liberties and individual freedom guaranteed by the state with priority. So, let us see what negative liberty promises to people in terms of having more freedom:

“...the heart of liberty is the absence of coercion by others; consequently, the liberal state's commitment to protecting liberty is, essentially, the job of ensuring that citizens do not coerce each other without compelling justification. So understood, negative liberty is an opportunity-concept. Being free is merely a matter of what we can do, what options are open to us, regardless of whether or not we exercise such options.” ([Gaus, Courtland, and Schmidt, 2015], p4).

In this case, negative liberty seems to supply an explanation of what it is to be more free, because more liberty is characterised by greater absence of restriction and coercion from others. In other words, people, as individuals, are not either directly or indirectly coerced. On the other hand, this approach which advocated individual freedom, if strengthened, it becomes dependent upon a structure representing the economic decisions taken by individuals instead of government. Within the political system, some rise to have greater wealth than others. Wealthy citizens, in a sense, have more freedom than others. In this case, is it the fault of the poor for having less economic

opportunities? If he does not have a specific capital to embark on free market, under the conception of negative liberty there are still external obstacles despite minimal coercive authority. For example, even if a poor person wants to travel (and has the right to do so), he cannot use the right to travel unless he can afford the travel costs. So, according to the negative definition of liberty, this person would not be free; they face a large external obstacle because of lack of money. Despite this, we would ascribe them the liberty to travel, despite their lack of money, threatening how negative liberty matches with liberty ordinarily understood.

Further, Garnett says that

“I have already offered what I take to be one of the best arguments against the negative account: that any plausible liberal theory is committed to aggregative liberty claims, and that only an agential account is able to make conceptual sense of liberty in the aggregative sense. This is a powerful argument against the negative libertarians’ commitment to treating only humanly imposed constraints as relevant to assessments of liberty.” ([Garnett, 2007], p21)

Not only imposed constraints by using economic advantages, but also conceptual problems threaten. Consider again the bus example. Earlier, we noted that the liberty to go to the park (understood as a disjunctive liberty) was not threatened by being banned from one particular bus. On the negative tradition, any way an action could be performed counts as a new action; there is no external obstacle to do that thing (in the bus example, taking the particular bus to get to the park counts as a whole new liberty which I have or do not). This results in a multiplication of liberties, making it hard to measure the amount of liberties an agent has.

Returning to social contracts again, roughly speaking, people choose to deliver their uncontrolled and limitless freeness to state authority, and in return of the delivering, social contracts supply several rights in order to people live in safety and harmony. So, we can claim that social contracts can give us an opportunity to fulfil our freedom in a balanced way. On the other hand, we can also say that it can restrict our freedom, because we should live in accordance with certain rules instead of our impulses once we have accepted the social contract. This requires negative liberty to understand these rights. So, neither having excessive freedom nor to be fully under control can provide us the freedom. Thus, we need to strengthen this concept by adding some extra things instead of preferring going back to the period before the social contract. So, while negative liberty is not everything, it is still needed.

4. The Effect of Positive Freedom Upon the Notion of Having More Liberty

Until this section, we have talked about negative freedom, and we illustrated why negative liberty is not enough to be coherent alone in terms of having more freedom by looking economic and more normal aspects. Though the social contract is premised on

notions of negative freedom, but this concept was not enough to understand the different liberties we have. So, we may appeal instead to positive freedom.

In this context, when we want to mention having more freedom, we should not face with external obstacles which are based on other people's freedom, or coercions which are based on government. Because of these problems, we could not examine a system in which everyone is free to live under the same conditions. For this reason, we cannot defend any kind of concept in terms of coherence when saying this person has more freedom than others so far. If we want to mention freedom opportunity for everyone equally, we should explain 'aggregative liberty', contrasting with disjunctive liberty. Garnett claims that:

"...aggregative liberty involves an aggregation of more particular disjunctive liberties: the extent of a person's liberty of movement, for instance, seems to depend in some way upon the number of specific movements that person is at liberty to make. And it seems that the simple claim that a person 'has liberty of movement' should be understood as the claim that the person has some (unspecified but sufficient) number of more specific liberties of movement." ([Garnett, 2007], p3)

In this case, we can say that aggregative liberty explains what it is to have freedom of movement. In other words, aggregative liberty of movement says when travelling by bus we should be able to travel however we want. So, this is the missing piece which help us to talk about freedom. At this point, when negative freedom tradition focuses on disjunctive, it cannot recognize that many different freedoms often actually give us a single freedom. For example, I can go to the park by walk, or by car if I have, instead of taking 88. So, my liberty to go to the park can be had without taking 88. Garnett concludes this subject that;

"The conclusion that each liberty must be included separately in a calculation of an agent's aggregative liberty is therefore unavoidable. The concern is then that this will mandate the inclusion of indefinitely many liberties (since the number of true descriptions of any action is indefinitely large). Conceptual incoherence threatens once more." ([Garnett, 2007], p16)

By contrast under the positive tradition, as long as you are able to take the bus to the park, you have the liberty to go to the park (and hence have more freedom than someone who cannot), without multiplying liberties.

When we consider the concept of negative freedom again, we can see that people seem to have the freedom to choose one of many actions at any one time. However, the negative tradition cannot define more liberty by looking different actions. Therefore, even if people mention having more freedom in negative traditions, this freedom is not coherent.

“Negative accounts cannot adopt this solution to the problem of indefinite numbers of descriptions, since it requires treating ignorance as a general obstacle to liberty. Again, if we are to have a conceptually coherent notion of aggregative liberty, we must abandon the negative account and recognise the relevance of agential constraints.” ([Garnett, 2007], p17)

To sum up, due to lack of positive freedom effect, the liberty in negative tradition seems incoherent in terms of having more freedom. So, we need to have some support of aggregative liberties as well as disjunctive ones, this is what the positive tradition supplies.

5. Conclusion

We have discussed in previous sections why negative liberty, though essential to forming a social contract, is not enough to be coherent alone in terms of having more freedom. In fact, negative liberty gave a lot of opportunity to supply freedom, but it is not coherent in terms of its premises. So, the negative tradition needs something extra to be coherent when a person, has more freedom than another (say with respect to aggregative liberties). As we discussed, having more freedom is very hard to measure under negative liberty. Even if saying purely that one person has more freedom than another, through our analyses we understand that in order to say this we need both negative and positive traditions.

Conflict of interests statement

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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