Contemporary Theories of Liberty

Lecture 1: Negative Liberty
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Overview

1. Freedom in general

2. Negative liberty

3. Clarifications
   a) Desirability
   b) Causality
   c) Actuality
   d) Intentionality

4. Criticisms
   a) Conceptual
   b) Political

5. Summing-up
Liberty

Cognates
- Ability
- Control
- Voluntariness
- Self-determination/autonomy
- Self-realisation/flourishing

Antonyms
- Prevention
- Force
- Coercion
- Domination
- Oppression
Liberty

- Freedom as a ‘triadic’ relation (McCallum):

  \( x \) is (not) free from \( y \) to (not) do/become \( z \)
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Negative liberty

‘the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am ... unfree’

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Negative liberty

\( x \) (the subject) \( y \) (the constraint)

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Negative liberty

Freedom in general
1.  \( x \), a subject
    is free from
2.  \( y \), a constraint
to do
3.  \( z \), some action

Negative liberty
1.  \( x \), an agent (typically an individual human being)
    is free from
2.  \( y \), external obstacles
to do
3.  \( z \), whatever this agent could otherwise do
Overview

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5. Summing-up
Freedom as non-frustration

‘a free-man is he that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to.’

– Hobbes, Leviathan, ch. 21, 2
Freedom as non-frustration

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**Problem**

– The contented slave with a kindly master
– Adaptive preferences
Freedom as non-interference

‘[freedom concerns] the absence of obstructions on roads along which a man can decide to walk. Such freedom ultimately depends not on whether I wish to walk at all, … but on how many doors are open, how open they are, upon their relative importance in my life … The extent of my social or political freedom consists in the absence of obstacles not merely to my actual, but to my potential, choices’

– Berlin (2002, p. 32)
Negative liberty

Non-frustration
1. x, an agent (typically an individual human being)
   *is free from*
2. y, external obstacles
   *to do*
3. z, whatever this agent *would* otherwise do

Non-interference
1. x, an agent (typically an individual human being)
   *is free from*
2. y, external obstacles
   *to do*
3. z, whatever this agent *could* otherwise do
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3. **Clarifications**
   a) Desirability
   b) **Causality**
   c) Actuality
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   b) Political

5. Summing-up
'the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am ... unfree'

Negative liberty

Freedom in general

1. \( x \), a subject
   is free from
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Negative liberty

1. \( x \), an agent (typically an individual human being)
is free from
2. \( y \), external \textit{artificial} obstacles
to do
3. \( z \), whatever this agent could otherwise do
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   a) Desirability
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   c) **Actuality**
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5. Summing-up
Coercion

1. A communicates to B that she proposes to bring about P unless B does Q
2. B regards A’s proposal as credible (and A knows this)
3. B does not want P to occur (and A knows this)
4. B strongly prefers doing Q to suffering P (and A knows this)
5. P is relatively serious (and A and B know this)
6. as a result of (1), B does Q to avoid A bringing about P
7. A does (1) in order to achieve (6)

– Grant Lamond, ‘Coercion’, International Encyclopedia of Ethics
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‘Relatively serious’ …
– According to whom?
– As judged against what standard?

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Intentionality

➢ Obstacles as ... ?
   a) ... intended and targeted?

   b) ... unintended, though foreseeable, by-product?

   c) ... unintended and unforeseeable by-product?
Intentionality

- Obstacles as ... ?
  a) ... intended and targeted?
  b) ... unintended, though foreseeable, by-product?
  c) ... unintended and unforeseeable by-product?
‘freedom ultimately depends ... on how many doors are open, how open they are ... [A]bsence of freedom is due to the closing of such doors or the failure to open them, as a result, intended or unintended, or alterable human practices ... although only if such acts are deliberately intended ... will they be liable to be called oppression.’

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Intentionality

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Recap

Freedom in general
1. x, a subject
   is free from
2. y, a constraint
to do
3. z, some action

Negative liberty
1. x, an agent (typically an individual human being)
   is free from
2. y, (actual/probable) external artificial interference
to do
3. z, whatever this agent could otherwise do
Recap

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1. x, a subject is free from

2. y, a constraint to do

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Criticisms of Negative liberty

Negative liberty
1. \( x \), an agent (typically an individual human being)
   
is free from

2. \( y \), (actual/probable) external artificial interference
   
to do

3. \( z \), whatever this agent could otherwise do

Criticisms (I): conceptual
1. \( x \): too individualistic, too ‘atomistic’

2. \( y \): various objections

3. \( z \): too quantitative, too ‘mechanical’ (freedom of a lever), insufficiently qualitative
Criticisms (I): conceptual

y: “actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with x’s opportunities”
Criticisms (I): conceptual

- Can freedom be limited by ...

1. ... **internal**, not just external, interference?
Criticisms (I): conceptual

y: “actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with x’s opportunities”

- Can freedom be limited by ...
  1. ... internal, not just external, interference?
  2. ... lacking certain abilities, not just suffering some interference?
Criticisms (I): conceptual

y: “actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with x’s opportunities”

➢ Can freedom be limited by ...

1. ... internal, not just external, interference?

2. ... lacking certain abilities, not just suffering some interference?

3. ... failure to exercise certain abilities, not just denial of opportunities for their exercise?
Criticisms (I): conceptual

y: “actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with x’s opportunities”

- Can freedom be limited by ...

1. ... internal, not just external, interference?
2. ... lacking certain abilities, not just suffering some interference?
3. ... failure to exercise certain abilities, not just denial of opportunities for their exercise?
4. ... possible, not just actual/probable, interference?
Criticisms (I): conceptual

y: “actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with x’s opportunities”

- Can freedom be limited by ...
  1. ... internal, not just external, interference?
  2. ... lacking certain abilities, not just suffering some interference?
  3. ... failure to exercise certain abilities, not just denial of opportunities for their exercise?
  4. ... possible, not just actual/probable, interference?
  5. ... impersonal social structures, not just by specific individual persons?
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Criticisms (II): political

‘it is perfectly conceivable that a liberal-minded despot would allow his subjects a large measure of personal freedom ... [T]here is no necessary connection between individual [negative] liberty and democratic rule.’

– Berlin (2002, pp.176-77)
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Bibliography

- Gerald C. MacCallum, Jr., ‘Negative and Positive Freedom’, *The Philosophical Review* 76, 3 (1967)
- David Miller, ‘Constraints on Freedom’, *Ethics* 94, 1 (1983)
- Grant Lamond, ‘Coercion’, in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*
Summing-up

Liberty in general
➢ Is it triadic?

Negative liberty in particular
➢ How does it fill in the triad?

Criticisms
➢ Should we be negative theorists about liberty?