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):

\[ x \text{ is (not) free from } y \text{ to (not) do/become } z \]
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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’

Negative liberty

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Negative liberty

\[ x \text{ (the subject)} \]
\[ y \text{ (the constraint)} \]

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‘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
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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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
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– Hobbes, Leviathan, ch. 21, 2

**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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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’

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 artificial obstacles
to do

3. \( z \), whatever this agent could otherwise do
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1. Freedom in general
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   c) **Actuality**
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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?

Moral responsibility

Causal responsibility

Deliberate

Negligent
‘freedom ultimately depends ... on how many doors are open ... [A]bsence of freedom is due to the closing of such doors ... as a result, intended or unintended, of alterable human practices ... [A]lthough only if such acts are deliberately intended ... will they be liable to be called oppression.’

– Berlin (2002, p. 32)
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freedom ultimately depends ... on how many doors are open ... [Absence of freedom is due to the closing of such doors ... 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.’

– Berlin (2002, p. 32)
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

**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

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
Freedom in general
1. x, a subject
   is free from
2. y, a constraint
to do
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Negative liberty
1. x, an agent (typically an individual human being)
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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

\[ y: \text{“actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with } x \text{’s opportunities”} \]
Criticisms (1): conceptual

- Can freedom be limited by ... 

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

- Can freedom be limited by ...
  1. ... internal, not just external, interference?
  2. ... lacking certain abilities, not just suffering some interference?

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?

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

3. ... failure to exercise certain abilities, not just denial of opportunities for their exercise?

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

- 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?

\[ y: \text{“actual (or probable) external interference by specific agents with x’s opportunities”} \]
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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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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?