Contemporary Theories of Liberty

Lecture 1: Negative Liberty
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In Congress, September 17, 1774.

The unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America, for these Causes:

In the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another; and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.
Overview

1. **Freedom in general**
2. Negative liberty
3. Clarifications
   a) Causality
   b) Desirability
   c) Actuality
   d) Intensity
   e) 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):

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

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

Negative freedom
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 freedom

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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Hobbes

‘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
Desirability

‘[freedom concerns] the absence of obstructions on roads along which a man \textbf{can decide} to walk. Such freedom ultimately depends \textbf{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 \textbf{not} merely to my \textbf{actual}, but to my \textbf{potential}, choices ...

[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.’

– Berlin (2002, p. 32)
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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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Intensity

‘[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 ... [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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Bibliography

- 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 complete the triad?

- **Criticisms**
  - Should we be negative theorists about liberty?
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