

# Isaiah Berlin's Many-Sided Concept of Liberty

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor

August 31, 2019

AP Photo/Alex Brandon

Speaking in praise of freedom has fallen out of fashion in American politics. That throws public discourse out of step with the country's constitutional system, which puts a premium on protecting individual liberty. It also places the national conversation about the operation and ends of government at odds with the widespread expectations of adult citizens who take for granted hard-won rights to choose — within broad limits established by laws equally applicable to all — their place of residence, community, profession, and mate, and to decide for themselves what to think, believe, say, revere and reject, read and hear, view and wear, and avoid and seek.

How, though, can we hope to maintain America's constitutional system and to satisfy shared expectations about the opportunity to pursue happiness as each conceives it if we lose interest in, and neglect the language of, liberty?

Each party has its own reasons for ignoring and even demoting freedom.

Democrats are consumed with promoting social justice through the substantial expansion of government. Bent on removing Donald Trump from the White House, many of the Democratic primary hopefuls are vying with one another to offer more comprehensive and costly programs to make access to government-provided health care universal, save the environment, and eliminate the distinction between lawful and unlawful immigrants. Frequently, the consequences for freedom and the rule of law are not given a second thought.

Meanwhile, Republicans aim to heed the populist demand to curb the power accumulated by entrenched Washington elites and to reorient government so that it reflects, rather than rides roughshod over, the will of the common people. Wary of being seen as nostalgic for the glory years of Reaganism by focusing on cutting taxes and limiting government — and also determined to distance themselves from the freedom agenda associated with George W. Bush's foreign policy — conservatives increasingly espouse the use of government to promote virtue and re-moralize American society. That government supervision of character and community could have a downside — such as, say, sapping the liberty that is a condition of meaningful ethical choice and robust voluntary associations — seems an increasingly remote consideration for many conservatives.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year of the publication of Sir Isaiah Berlin's "Four Essays on Liberty" provides an occasion to refresh our understanding of freedom's roots, virtues, and vulnerabilities. A seminal work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century political theory, the book explores the political ideologies, social

science dogmas, and confusions of concepts — all still very much thriving throughout the world’s liberal democracies — that threaten individual liberty, and it sets forth enduring reasons for steadfastly defending freedom.

Born into a prosperous family in Riga, Latvia, in 1909, Berlin moved with his parents to London in 1921. He graduated from Corpus Christi College Oxford in 1928 and more or less remained at the university until his death in 1997. The author of more than 20 books, Berlin was celebrated in his lifetime for his unquenchable curiosity about people and their peculiarities and regularities, as well as for his extraordinary learning, exuberant conversation, and infectious zest for life. Freedom was not the only preoccupation of his lectures and writings — which also explored romanticism, the Counter-Enlightenment, Marxism, Russian intellectuals, and the Soviet Union — but it was a unifying theme.

Berlin denied that individual freedom is the only good or the supreme good. But he insisted that it is an indispensable one.

The worthy ends of life are many and varied, and choice is a defining feature of human dignity, Berlin maintained. From what he regarded as these bedrock truths about the human condition, he reasoned that human beings must be given wide latitude by other persons and by government to determine their own way in the world.

In the first two essays of his book, Berlin examines common assumptions about human beings and recurring patterns of thought about politics and society that subvert the premises on which freedom rests. “Political Ideas in the 20th Century” exposes the intellectual tendencies that operate to “discredit uncomfortable questions or to educate men not to ask them.” Reactionaries and romantics of previous ages subordinated individual reason to inherited tradition and institutional authority, insisting that the hardest and deepest questions about morality, politics, and faith should be left to the clergy and aristocracy. Going further, prominent schools of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy and psychology — products of Enlightenment thought — sought to deny the very reality of puzzles about the relations between, for instance, freedom and order, democracy and duty, and reason and revelation. Intellectuals reconceived these enduring tensions as confusions of language that could be dissolved by linguistic analysis or as mental disturbances that could be cured through psychotherapy. Fascism and communism radicalized these ambitions to dissolve perplexing philosophical questions: They silenced dissenters by slaughtering them by the millions and tens of millions.

Yet the blood-soaked lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not cure intellectuals of the ambition of policing thought and outlawing dissent. In previous ages, according to Berlin, it was the “supporters of authority” who endeavored to restrict investigation of the elusive issues to which politics and justice give rise. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the tendency to circumscribe and confine and limit, to determine the range of what may be asked and what may not, what may be believed and what may not, is no longer a distinguishing mark of the old ‘reactionaries,’” he writes. “On the contrary, it comes as powerfully from the heirs of the radicals, rationalists, ‘progressives’ of the nineteenth century as from the descendants of their enemies.” Alas, the authoritarian propensities of progressive intellectuals to curtail liberty of thought and discussion have intensified in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In “Historical Inevitability,” Berlin identifies “two powerful doctrines” promulgated by 20<sup>th</sup>-century students of politics and society that undermine the belief in human freedom: determinism and relativism. The determinist supposition, common to Marxists and a wide variety of social scientists, asserts that large patterns of thought and conduct, vast impersonal forces, and the laws of cause and effect govern history and strictly control the generation of ideas and the flow of events. Meanwhile, relativism in its many varieties affirms that all judgments are subjective, there is no escape from the various and conflicting *interpretations* of moral phenomena to the *reality* of moral principles, and, therefore, reason is ultimately powerless to adjudicate disputes about justice.

Berlin expresses sympathy for the impulses that give rise to determinism and relativism. Many who propounded determinist ideas aimed to go beyond the simple-minded glorification of heroes and denunciation of villains that characterize popular history to understand the variety of factors, many hidden from those occupying the commanding heights of politics, that explain the actions of statesmen and states. Those who supplied the arguments for relativism often were keen to bring into focus the multitude of subterranean factors — particularly culture and language — that color and direct perceptions, passions, and judgments. Nevertheless, the implications of determinism and rationalism for the moral life, Berlin argued, are disastrous.

It follows from both that explanations of history in terms of individual character and human intentions and purposes are invalid, expressions of ignorance and superstition, because freedom is a delusion. Under the dominion of determinism, the inner life and outward action are the result of an unbreakable causal chain governed by the laws of natural science. According to the tenets of relativism, what we say and do are inescapable reflections of a cultural inheritance that is itself arbitrary and irrational.

Berlin does not purport to refute determinism and relativism. But he does show with both subtlety and gusto that the arguments in their favor are far from dispositive and that both obscure the terms of praise and blame, responsibility and freedom that ordinary men and women use — as do most professors of political science and philosophy outside of their professional pronouncements — to describe their own experience and to judge the opinions and actions of others.

“Two Concepts of Liberty,” in which Berlin distinguishes negative and positive liberty, is his most influential essay. Negative liberty designates freedom in the *pursuit* of happiness from the arbitrary power of other persons and the state. Positive liberty refers in the first place to the conditions that enable an individual to achieve mastery over his or her appetites and passions and, ultimately, to overcome whatever circumstances and obstacles thwart the *attainment* of happiness. Originally delivered in 1958 as his inaugural lecture as Oxford’s Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, Berlin acknowledged the related and overlapping dimensions of the two concepts of liberty, while emphasizing the propensity within modern political thought to conscript positive liberty to serve authoritarian ends.

“It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good, which I am too blind to see: this may, on occasion, be for my benefit; indeed it may enlarge the scope of my liberty,” writes Berlin. “It is another to say that if it is my good, then I am not being coerced, for I have willed it,

whether I know this or not, and am free (or ‘truly’ free) even while my poor earthly body and foolish mind bitterly reject it, and struggle with the greatest desperation against those who seek, however benevolently, to impose it.” With stunning intellectual virtuosity, Berlin defended the bedrock and common-sense understanding of freedom as the right to make one’s own choices from those progressives on the left and theocrats on the right who redefine freedom as living under laws that compel individuals to conform to state-enforced conceptions of virtue, justice, and happiness.

In “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” Berlin provides a well-rounded appreciation of the man who formulated most incisively the principles of modern freedom. Mill has often been disparaged as a crypto-relativist whose defense of freedom was rooted in a rejection of the very idea of human excellence. As Berlin shows, however, Mill defends freedom of speech because of its contribution to the search for truth. And he champions the virtue of toleration, which implies that civility depends on the discipline of passion, not because he denies the reality of noble character and human flourishing but because he is confident that the individualism he cherishes is both multifarious and a hard-won achievement. Berlin stands with Mill in his celebration of persons who develop their own convictions and cultivate their distinctive gifts and talents. Both recognize that owing to the variety of worthy lives, the pursuit of happiness will be driven by conflicting visions. For both, that makes toleration — the act not of respecting or lauding but refraining from stifling and suppressing — a crucial virtue.

The major weakness of Berlin’s prolific reflections on freedom is his tendency to presume that the heights of pre-modern thinking, typified by biblical faith and classical philosophy, are inevitably hostile to negative liberty because they inherently suppose that government must impose on all the one true conception of human flourishing. Both biblical faith and the classical political philosophy, however, are more many-sided than Berlin imagined.

Indeed, a leading reason for praising the principles of American constitutional government is that they draw on both biblical faith and classical political philosophy to create a form of limited government that secures the negative liberty to pursue happiness in a great variety of ways, including by building voluntary communities that embody a positive conception of liberty.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter. He is also director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States government.*