



Two Concepts of Liberty

Isaiah Berlin

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Het werk van de filosoof Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) vormt een van de krachtigste verdedigingen van het westerse pluralisme. Zijn beroemde opstel Twee opvattingen van vrijheid biedt een toegankelijke inleiding in zijn denken. Berlins scherpzinnige analyse van het vrijheidsbegrip bepaalt tot de dag van vandaag ons sociaal-politieke denken.

Two Concepts of Liberty Details

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Wim says

Hoewel al een paar decennia oud, is het nog steeds een aanrader om te lezen, zeker in het licht van de hedendaagse discussie over wat vrijheid precies is. Berlin maakt onderscheidt in twee vormen: de positieve en de negatieve opvatting.

De negatieve opvatting omvat de vraag wat wil de mens en welke verlangens heeft hij. De positieve vorm van vrijheid komt naar voren als men niet de vraag beantwoordt “Welke vrijheid heeft men om te doen of te zijn?” maar de vraag “Door wie wordt men geregeerd?”. Of anders gezegd, wie bepaalt dat iets wel, dan wel niet gedaan mag worden. Het is een verlangen van het individu om zichzelf te regeren, of in ieder geval een bijdrage te kunnen leveren aan het proces dat bepaalt hoe zijn leven verloopt.

Door dit begrippenpaar te introduceren worden tal van problemen van de hedendaagse maatschappij een stuk inzichtelijker. Want hoewel op het eerste gezicht dit wel zo lijkt, draait niet alles om het individuele verlangen. Het gevaar van de huidige maatschappij is dat we geheel in beslag worden genomen door het vervullen van onze private wensen en verlangens en we vergeten dat het individu ook deel moet nemen aan het politieke publieke leven om de garantie voor deze individuele vrijheden af te dwingen. Tegelijkertijd moeten we wel Berlin's waarschuwing ter harte nemen en oppassen voor uitwassen die de positieve opvatting van vrijheid kan veroorzaken.

Berlin schets een complex systeem van twee tegenstrijdige vormen van vrijheid die beide onontbeerlijk zijn voor onze ultieme gevoel van vrijheid. Een aanrader voor een ieder die meer wil weten van deze maatschappij dan de voetbaluitslagen van de zondagmiddag.

Frank D'hanis junior says

Very nuanced book about liberty that can be liked by proponents of state intervention and the regulation of capital. Isaiah Berlin's stance on the possibility of moral knowledge and universal values has more in common with the early pragmatists (James, Dewey et cetera) than with value relativists.

mytwocents says

A cutting analysis of the prevailing forces behind the dualistic nature of societal western freedom. However, there is no insight or analysis on the totality or unity of absolute liberty that belief structures are formed around.

Given the western tradition is based on an individual who achieves absolute liberation, it is interesting how the lesser forms of freedom outlined by Berlin have been the prevailing battleground for man kind in the past 2000 years. Especially given the East is rooted in a unity of individual ascension through enlightenment and produced more prolific cultures, often under 'negative freedom' and societal class structure. Berlin only

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<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published...>

Alix says

This is a well-constructed, internally coherent essay. Strangely, I think one of Berlin's important contributions here is that he recognizes that liberty may not be the only thing we care about.

Colm Gillis says

In a relatively short book (this was a lecture) Berlin contrasts what he termed 'negative' liberty - or freedom 'from' others - and 'positive' liberty - or the freedom 'to do' or 'to be'. This was written in the midst of the Cold War and the weight of the Soviet Union and other totalitarian regimes is heavy. His model is simplistic and he can't help but lump in any type of rule with totalitarian rule. This means that the lecture often lacks discernment. Where Berlin is not at his strongest when giving general rules-of-thumb as to how to spot freedom-lovers from freedom-haters. He makes for far more interesting reading when analysing specific thinkers or specific ideologies. The book does engage but it is far too theoretical and speculative. Since it amounts to essentially a psychological theory of politics, Berlin seemingly strays into giving his own opinion instead of looking at the facts and drawing more subtle interpretations.

Carlos says

"Admitir que la satisfacción de algunos de nuestros ideales puede hacer en principio imposible la satisfacción de otros significa afirmar que la idea de una satisfacción humana total es formalmente una quimera metafísica"

Luis says

Lo leí al paso de un documental realizado por Adam Curtis, no recuerdo si fue "The trap" o "HyperNormalisation", en uno de estos lo mencionaban y llamó mi atención.

El análisis que realiza Berlin sobre la libertad es por demás interesante, es un pensador que de no haber sido por el documentalista, valga aquí la redundancia; jamás hubiera leído ni conocido.

Eduardo Fort says

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) fue uno de los filósofos liberales más importantes del siglo XX. En esta pequeña obra analiza el concepto de libertad, así como su recorrido biográfico e intelectual.

Abubakar Mehdi says

Two Concepts of liberty is a treatise by Isaiah Berlin on the enigmatic subject of Liberty. At first it might appear as naïve or simplistic on his part to have a contrived view of 'Liberty', a word notorious for being difficult to define. But as we progress, we see that Berlin draws arguments from Kant, Hegel and Plato to make his case which is convincing and thought provoking.

In the very start, he briefly notes how important Political Thought is as a field of inquiry, and how it has far-reaching effects on the society. However, he laments that Political Theory is not given its due. This in turn stagnates the evolution and subsequent development of this most critical subject, as Berlin remarks:

“To neglect the field of political thought, because its unstable subject matter, with its blurred edges, is not to be caught by the fixed concepts, abstract models, and fine instruments suitable to logic or to linguistic analysis--to demand a unity of method in philosophy, and reject whatever the method cannot successfully manage--is merely to allow oneself to remain at the mercy of primitive and uncriticised political beliefs.”

Political forces cannot bring change, for good or for bad, unless they clothe themselves in ideas and political theory might well be a way of providing structure and discipline to these forces. As a branch of moral philosophy, it is pervasive and profoundly influential in shaping societies and cultural narratives.

Negative liberty is classically defined as absence of coercion. It means to say that an individual's freedom will be greater if there is little or no interference or coercion to prohibit his actions. Though some limits are quite necessary to secure the rights and freedom of the people around him, this should not hinder the development of the individual in particular and the society in general.

Positive liberty could be summarised as “being your own master”, which entails being an active and thinking individual responsible for his/her actions. This concept of freedom comes with a realisation that one still can be a master of himself and yet be a slave to one's passions or baser instincts. Would one still be free? Berlin explains that this liberty cannot survive for long without some checks on it.

So the prescription for this crisis would be to rely on reason and common sense. To follow the path prescribed by any organised religion would mean complete submission of one's liberty, but to put some constraints on individuals is necessary nonetheless. In a democratic system, this goal can ideally be achieved to some extent. Reason and logic are the tools at our disposal that can be utilized to safeguard our liberty all the while putting limits on it. To defend one's liberty doesn't necessarily means to fight or rebel against the Authority, but to analyse how pervasive it is. As Berlin says, it is not important who has the authority, what is important is that how much authority do they have?

So there is no single formula to harmonize the various desires that men have, and to choose an individualistic approach here would be to defeat the very purpose of 'liberty'. Pluralism and Negative freedom are thus the truer and more humane ideals.

Patrick says

Highly recommended to read just after Dostoyevsky's "Demons".

Mohammad Ali says

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