

Why Would Berlin Mischaracterize Rousseau?

By Sean McGuire (Portland State University)

Abstract: Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" introduced the terminology of negative and positive liberty in 1958. Berlin asserts that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political philosophy (particularly "On the Social Contract") exemplifies the dangerous notion of positive liberty. I argue that Berlin's presentation distorts Rousseau's work and overlooks resources that exculpate Rousseau with regard to despotic regimes. Berlin's interpretation and portrayal of Rousseau are examined. Berlin's claims are examined mainly in light of Rousseau's "Third Discourse" (The Discourse on Political Economy), as opposed to Berlin's emphasis on "The Social Contract". This work contains Rousseau's normative commentary on the principles of good government. The adequacy of Berlin's positive/negative liberty framework is tested with respect to Rousseau's own claims. The topic of this essay is the treatment, and possible mistreatment, of Rousseau's political philosophy by Isaiah Berlin. The paper being discussed is Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty". The two main faults that I notice in Berlin's presentation are his suggestions that Rousseau's work could possibly legitimize a despotism blind to violations of negative liberty and that Rousseau, being a main figure discussed in the tradition of positive liberty, is responsible not only for the propagation of increasingly dangerous ideologies but also atrocities done for their sake.

Positive and Negative Liberty

Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" is an examination of how political philosophers have understood the concept of freedom or liberty (Berlin uses these terms interchangeably). This topic is worthy of consideration because freedom has been a foundational aspect of political philosophy. Berlin's view is that political philosophy animates men in their deeds; freedom is one of the primary things they seek. Unfortunately, the different conceptions of liberty that individuals hold lead to conflict (sometimes violent) among them. Negative and positive freedom are discussed as the two dominant strains in political theory with regard to the definition of freedom and as the opposing sides in "the open war that is being fought between two systems of ideas".⁹³

The first notion of freedom Berlin discusses is negative liberty. This notion of freedom concerns the interference that individuals encounter from other individuals in pursuit of their objectives or purposes. This is the freedom to be left alone by other people, especially the government. Berlin connects this view with Locke, Tocqueville, Smith, Mill, and Constant. Mill and Constant are the focus of Berlin's account of negative liberty. The former held that this notion of liberty was "sacred" and the latter defended negative liberty against its encroacher positive liberty. Berlin remarks that "adherents of the 'negative' notion [of liberty] represent [positive liberty] as being, at times, no better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny."⁹⁴

⁹³Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (London: Oxford University P., 1969), 1.

⁹⁴Berlin, 8.

Positive liberty is the ability of an individual to determine one's self. The philosophers that Berlin associates with this tradition are Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Fichte. Berlin's presentation suggests that philosophers of positive liberty have seen an internal conflict between the rational and the passionate within each individual. The satisfaction of positive liberty would be the domination of the passions by the rational self: self-mastery.⁹⁵ Two ways of reconciling the self are discussed by Berlin. These are self-abnegation, or limiting what one wills to what is attainable (Berlin addresses this in his section "The retreat to the inner citadel"), and self-realization.

Berlin's distinction of these central concepts of liberty and his subsequent analysis are useful and informative. His discovery that Mill's negative liberty does not preclude autocracy is particularly poignant.⁹⁶ His rejection of self-abnegation as liberty (another fault of Mill's) is compelling.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, readers should be aware of Berlin's problematic use of Rousseau which is unfair and misleading. Berlin asserts things about positive liberty (of which Rousseau is said to be an author) that are not compatible with Rousseau's normative claims concerning government and the role of freedom in political theory.

Berlin's Genealogy of Positive Liberty

Berlin first mentions Rousseau early in the essay and connects Rousseau directly with the legacy of violence from the French Revolution's "Reign of Terror". Berlin acquaints the reader with the threat of Rousseau, "...the German poet Heine warned the French not to underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilization. He spoke of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as the sword with which German deism had been decapitated, and described the works of Rousseau as the blood-stained weapon which, in the hands of Robespierre, had destroyed the old regime."⁹⁸ Berlin uses Heine to introduce both the danger of ideas and the specific danger of Rousseau and Kant's work (a theme which continues throughout the piece). Berlin recounts the tradition of the philosophers of positive liberty, with Rousseau and Kant at first and Hegel (and the disciples of Hegel) and Marx later. For Berlin, the common element for these philosophers is the belief that freedom will be achieved through the conflict of two selves: one's "empirical self" and the rationally

⁹⁵Ibid., 8.

⁹⁶Ibid., 7. Berlin: 'Liberty in this sense is principally concerned with the area of control, not with its source. Just as a democracy may, in fact, deprive the individual citizen of a great many liberties which he might have in some other form of society, so it is perfectly conceivable that a liberal-minded despot would allow his subjects a large measure of personal freedom.'

⁹⁷Ibid., 13.

⁹⁸Ibid., 1.

enlightened self. The former being informed by one's passions; the latter informed by reason. Berlin explains that Rousseau and Kant developed ideologies that privileged this rationally enlightened self.

The rationally enlightened self recognizes one's true interest while the "empirical self" would not. The next step for advocates of positive liberty is self-realization. Self-realization is instituting reason as the guiding principle of one's will and the binding of the passions. Berlin credits Rousseau (with Kant and Fichte) for recognizing that this doctrine of self-determined positive liberty could be applied on the societal level as well as the individual level. Rousseau and others "...came at some point to ask themselves whether a rational life not only for the individual, but also for society, was possible, and if so, how it was to be achieved."⁹⁹ Berlin is referring here to Rousseau's concept of the general will. Berlin does not use this term in the paper at all, but he responds directly to Rousseau's solution (from Book 1, ch. 6 "On the Social Contract"): the way to substitute reason for passion on the societal level is the alienation of personal rights through law. This is the submission of individuals to the general will. What Rousseau sees as the rationally enlightened self-interest of all, is what Berlin sees as the brutal, often violent intrusion on negative liberty and the equally dangerous marriage of autonomy and authority.

This doctrine was dangerous for Berlin because self-realization required the "empirical self" (of individuals in society) *to be made to accept* what their rational selves would authorize, even over their objections. The conception of freedom that Berlin attributes to the thinkers of positive liberty is the freedom that requires individuals to be made to accept the forfeiture of property and the alienation of their rights to the collective. Berlin explains the mechanism of coercion, "In due course, the thinkers who bent their energies to the solution of the problem on these lines came to be faced with the question of how in practice men were to be made rational in this way. Clearly they must be educated. For the uneducated are irrational, heteronomous, and need to be coerced, if only to make life tolerable for the rational if they are to live in the same society."¹⁰⁰ This is why positive freedom destroys negative freedom for Berlin; the satisfaction of positive liberty necessitates the abridgement or corruption of negative liberty.

The rationale behind this use of force (on Berlin's interpretation of positive liberty) is a benevolent paternalism. People must be made to do what they cannot recognize is in their best interest. Berlin notices a difficulty for Kant on this point because it is coercive and disrespectful of autonomy (a crucial aspect of Kant's moral philosophy) to *educate* men in this way and make them obey laws of which they disapprove

⁹⁹ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁰ibid., 18.

(based on their rational faculties).¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Berlin presents aspects of both Rousseau's and Kant's political works that license this form of benevolent despotism.

Berlin also explains that political philosophies based on rational self-determination should logically all come to the same conclusions. He traces this sentiment back to ancient Greek rationalist political philosophy. This search for rational self-direction should lead (per Comte, according to Berlin) to the "correct way of life" and the "one true solution".¹⁰² In Berlin's conclusion and final pages he tends to make even bolder claims which serve to further vilify positive liberty. Berlin states:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals - justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution.¹⁰³

Rousseau's Concepts of Human Nature and Freedom

I find many reasons why Berlin's notions of positive and negative liberty are not adequate to describe Rousseau's political philosophy. In the first place and as Berlin notes (with respect to Mill) concepts of freedom are premised on concepts of human nature. Berlin makes no mention of Rousseau's famous account of the transition of humanity from the natural (or savage) state to civilized man as found in "The Discourse on Inequality" (or "The Second Discourse"). Compared to Rousseau's later works, ("Discourse on Political Economy" and "On the Social Contract") which are positive with respect to the articulation of principles for good government, the Second Discourse is stark, harsh critique of political society generally.

Part I of the Second Discourse describes the condition of man in the natural state, "in the first Embryo of the species"¹⁰⁴. This would be man as issued by nature and prior to the advancements of government, law, cities, agriculture, metallurgy, property, music, dancing, homes, and families. Men and women were solitary; children left mothers as soon as they were able and had no need of reunions. None

¹⁰¹Ibid., 21.

¹⁰²Ibid., 20.

¹⁰³Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁴Jean Rousseau. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Edited by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134.

of this would have been offensive to natural man because this “Savage man, deprived of every sort of enlightenment, experiences only the Passions of this latter kind [those owing to the impulsion of nature]; his Desires do not exceed his Physical needs; The only goods he knows in the Universe are food, a female, and rest; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger...”¹⁰⁵ Conduct between humans is ignorant of morality both good and evil, and is based largely on the aversion to suffering of one’s fellow humans.¹⁰⁶ Part II of “The Second Discourse” explains the developments that led to man’s irreversible and institutionalized subjugation. Rousseau’s major claim is that the combination of man’s urge to be esteemed by others and the ability to accrue wealth (initially in agricultural terms: land and cattle) beyond what is necessary for survival created incentives to disregard the gentle attitudes they had held towards one another. Rousseau explains the origin of property among the partially developed human race:

...In a word, so long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single individual could perform and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy as far as they could by their Nature be, and continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into smiling Fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests.¹⁰⁷

Rousseau envisions this to be one of the least pleasant eras in history. Acts of violence over property would be prevalent as humanity “...debased and devastated, no longer able to turn back or renounce its wretched acquisitions...brought itself to the brink of ruin”.¹⁰⁸ This is the perilous condition that necessitated the sacrifice of “natural freedom”. Political organization became a necessity for the protection of life and property for all members of society, however its establishment favored the already powerful (in terms of resources) over the weak. Rousseau on the danger and necessity of the new political order: “...those most capable of anticipating the abuses were precisely those who counted on profiting from them, and even the wise saw that they had to make up their mind to sacrifice one part of their freedom to preserve the other, as a wounded man has his arm cut off to save the rest of His Body.”¹⁰⁹ This bargain for protection (natural freedom exchanged for political or civil freedom) must be a limitation for

¹⁰⁵Rousseau, “The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings,” 142.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 173.

positive freedom. Positive freedom in the total sense is not an option for Rousseau once political society and its precursors (property, accumulation) exist. Yet, the republican theme of protection of life and property continues throughout Rousseau's work and is the essential preoccupation of legitimate government in "The Third Discourse".

Rousseau against Berlin's Rousseau

Berlin identified the general will in Rousseau as an expression of positive liberty and positive liberty as something which justifies brutal tyranny, the education of men as to their best interest over their objections, and which can authorize the "sacrifice" of men. Conversely, Rousseau speaks clearly that the general will is a *limit* on both "civil freedom"¹¹⁰ and the ends of government¹¹¹ (which consist mainly in good management of communal resources, effective legislation towards mutual interest, and the minimization of corruption intrinsic to the political society). More, for Rousseau the sacrifice of even one innocent to an oppressive government warrants immediate dissolution of that government.

A main difference between Berlin's positive liberty and Rousseau's general will is the purpose of each conceptual tool. Berlin depicts a set of ideological objectives that correspond to a utopian end to political conflict while Rousseau's general will is an expression of those particular political objectives which most preserve the citizen's ability to live and prosper, despite the inherent inequality of the continuing political project. Berlin's positive freedom can legitimate any set of objectives deemed "rational" (including violence) but general will can legitimate only that which protects property and harms none of the citizens. Even criminals (traitors against society) who might be killed for the purposes of deterrence are to be spared if practicable.¹¹² Chiefs, magistrates, legislators, citizens should be able to understand their interests as individuals, the interests or "particular will" of the group to which they belong (as priests or soldiers), and the interests of the group as a whole. Deliberation on the general will and the other wills is an activity that Rousseau expects the members of a society should engage in. Rousseau's general will is not as static or necessarily state-affirming as Berlin's presentation of it.

Rousseau discusses general will in "On the Social Contract", but it is introduced in the "Third Discourse". Rousseau's second rule for government in the "Third Discourse" discretely addresses the

¹¹⁰Jean Rousseau. *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Edited by Victor Gourevitch. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54.

¹¹¹Rousseau, "The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings," 9.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 65.

education of citizens toward the dictates of general will. At first glance it may seem that Berlin's claim about the forced conformity of all to the general will (as an expression of positive liberty) holds water. Rousseau states: "[The] Second essential rule of public *economy*, no less important than the first. Do you wish the general will to be carried out? See to it that all particular wills take their bearings by it; and since virtue is nothing but the conformity of the particular will to the general will, to say the same thing in a word, make virtue reign."¹¹³ Soon after, Rousseau continues with the mechanism of this conformity, "It is not enough to tell the citizens, be good; they have to be taught to do so;...and love of fatherland is most effective..."¹¹⁴ However, Rousseau is not the supporter of tyranny that Berlin has presented him as. The success of encouraging people to love the Fatherland is contingent on the fatherland being worthy of their love. If the fatherland did not protect civil security, "...the word *fatherland* could only have an odious or a ridiculous meaning for them."¹¹⁵

Berlin did not offer readers a portrayal of the Rousseau's radical opposition to tyranny. Rousseau is radical because he advocates *immediate* dissolution of tyrannical/despotic regimes. Contrary to Berlin, Rousseau gives a full-throated defense of the protection of citizens from the injustice of despots:

Private safety is so closely bound up with the public confederation that, if it were not for the concessions that have to be made to human weakness, this convention would be by right be dissolved if a single citizen in the state perish who could have been saved; if a single one were wrongfully kept in jail, and if a single lawsuit were lost through a manifest injustice: for once the fundamental conventions have been violated, it is no longer clear what right or interest could maintain the people in the social union, lest it be retained in it by sheer force, which makes for the dissolution of the civil state.¹¹⁶

This fiery condemnation of despotism and tyranny is a further illustration of why Rousseau and Berlin's Rousseau do not match up.

Why would Berlin do this?

There are at least three potential explanations for Berlin having presented Rousseau this way. Solution 1: Berlin was a careless scholar. I find this to be least likely of my solutions, however his reading of

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

Rousseau's general will emphasizes what is found in "On the Social Contract" while neglecting entirely Rousseau's introduction and explanation of general will in "Discourse on Political Economy". Solution 2: The sheer breadth of work discussed in "Two Concepts of Liberty" required the abridgement of important aspects of Rousseau's work and precluded a nuanced presentation. Berlin does not present an evenhanded or nuanced reading of Rousseau because he was not able to. This explanation is more plausible than the first, but perhaps more damning as Berlin's renditions of other thinkers would now also potentially be in question. Solution 3: Berlin purposely misrepresented Rousseau and other advocates of "positive liberty" due to his anti-Marxist political biases. Berlin, as a political opponent of Communist ideologies, may have wanted to impugn an entire branch of philosophical thinkers and Rousseau was on that branch. A combination of reasons 2 and 3 is the most likely explanation. Berlin's remarks in a 1998 interview substantiate my speculation. In the interview, Berlin agrees with interviewer Steven Lukes that "Two Concepts of Liberty" is not neutral conceptual analysis, but rather carries a powerful "anti-Marxist" political message.¹¹⁷ On the whole, Berlin does readers of "Two Concepts of Liberty" who do not encounter Rousseau's work elsewhere a disservice and offers a prejudicial interpretation to those who have.

Bibliography

- Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Four Essays on Liberty*. London: Oxford University P., 1969.
- Berlin, Isaiah, and Steven Lukes. "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes." *Salmangundi* 120, no. Fall 1998, 55-134.
<http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/pdf/40549054.pdf?acceptTC=true>.
- Rousseau, Jean. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Edited by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Rousseau, Jean. *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Edited by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹¹⁷Isaiah Berlin and Steven Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes," in *Salmangundi* (120, no. Fall 1998), 92.