

ON THE MEANING OF THE CONCEPT OF POSITIVE FREEDOM AND ITS ROLE IN NORMATIVE DISCOURSE

Two concepts of freedom

The goal of this essay is to try to refute three main objections which can be raised against positive freedom. The first objection says that the concept of positive freedom is *irremediably vague*. The second one asserts that positive freedom is *unattractive as a personal ideal*. The third objection says that positive freedom is *dangerous as a political ideal*. Before I deal with these three objections, let me present some introductory remarks on the concept of positive freedom.

As is well known, positive freedom is one of two concepts of freedom (the other being negative freedom) analyzed by Isaiah Berlin in his famous essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*.¹ The intuition that stands behind the distinction between negative and positive freedom is that we can use the term 'freedom' to describe two markedly different phenomena: either a situation which is *external* to an agent or an *internal* state of an agent. In the former case, by saying that an agent is free we mean that she would not encounter external (i.e. imposed by other persons) constraints if she wanted to act on various desires (those desires which she actually has and which she could have as a human being), i.e. is *negatively free*, whereas in the latter case by saying that an agent is free we mean that she 'governs herself' – is a true master of herself, i.e. is *positively free*. As can be easily seen, while the concept of negative freedom is relatively clear (though not devoid of some intricacies of its own, e.g. it is clear that negative freedom cannot be unlimited, though it is not clear where exactly those limits should be put), the concept of positive freedom – as presented above – is very unclear (what does it exactly mean to be a true master of oneself?). This is the reason why the concept of positive freedom needs explication more urgently than the concept of nega-

¹ This essay can be found in a collection of Isaiah Berlin's essays *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, London and New York 1969. Incidentally, it may be worthwhile noticing that, contrary to the oft-repeated opinion, the distinction between negative and positive freedom was not introduced by Berlin – it had been known to philosophers long before: Berlin's great merit was to recall this distinction and to make a brilliant analysis of the relations between negative and positive freedom.

tive freedom. Moreover, positive freedom understood as being a true master of oneself is not self-evidently attractive as a personal ideal (it is not obvious that being a true master of oneself is really a state to which we should aspire) and as a political ideal (Berlin's claim that the ideal of positive freedom can easily be used by the authorities to justify the imposition of considerable limitations on our negative freedom may be right if this ideal is understood as being a true master of oneself: the authorities may justify the imposition of such limitations by pointing out that we cannot achieve by our own efforts the level of our 'true or *noumenal* self' – and thereby cannot be true masters of ourselves – if we are not deprived of those options which are likely to be selected by our 'empirical self;' I shall return to this problem at the end of this essay). The account of positive freedom which I would like to propose will be eclectic or compound, as it will draw on various accounts proposed in philosophical literature. However, it seems that only such an account of positive freedom can give justice to the multi-layered character of the very phenomenon of positive freedom. I shall also argue that the concept of positive freedom, when viewed in its complexity, proves to be an attractive personal ideal and a non-dangerous and attractive political ideal.

Traditional accounts of positive freedom

Before providing an account of the concept of positive freedom, let me briefly present the main accounts of positive freedom proposed in philosophical literature. My presentation of these accounts will be very simplistic: I shall present only their essential features without going into subtleties of each of these accounts and without analyzing the relations between these accounts. The first account, which can be dubbed '*Platonic*,' says that an agent is positively free if her reason controls her passions. This account does not require that our passions (the spirited (*thumoeides*) and the appetitive (*épathumêtikon*) part of our soul) should be extinguished but only that they should be controlled by reason (the rational (*logistikon*) part of our soul). The second account, which can be called '*Stoic*,' says that an agent is positively free if she has reached the state of *apátheia*, i.e. if she has extinguished her passions, and thereby, as was emphasized especially by Epictetus, is not attached to things which are not dependent on us. A Stoic sage who has reached this state manifests *amor fati*: she does not want to change the course of events that happen to her but accepts it as good. The third account, which can be dubbed '*Nietzschean*,' says that an agent is positively free if she is not a 'reactive person,' i.e. if she is free from *ressentiment*. The fourth account, which can be dubbed '*Marcusean*' (as it can be ascribed, *inter alia*, to Herbert Marcuse) asserts that an agent is positively free if her goals – values to be realized by her – have been formed in the process not based on manipulation, pressure, ignorance, deceit, etc. The fifth account, which can be called '*axiological*,' says that an agent is positively free if her goals – values to be realized by her – are of special kind: they are *high* values. The sixth account, which can be dubbed '*Socratic*,' says that an agent is positively free if her beliefs – regarding herself as well as the external world – are *true* beliefs. The seventh

account, which can be called (somewhat awkwardly) '*akrasia-sensitive*,' asserts that an agent is positively free if she does not suffer from *akrasia*. The above list seems to include the main accounts proposed in philosophical literature (though this list could assuredly be supplemented with some other accounts). However, none of them, when considered in isolation, reflects the whole richness of the phenomenon of positive freedom. In order to build a concept of positive freedom which would fully reflect this phenomenon, one must therefore combine the above partial accounts. Before I make an attempt to build such a concept, however, I would like to point out that even though most of the above accounts seem uncontroversial, i.e. they can be rightly regarded as reflecting some aspect of the rich phenomenon of positive freedom, one of them – the Stoic account – is highly controversial in this regard. More specifically, it is dubious if *apátheia* can plausibly be viewed as an expression of positive freedom; rather, it seems an expression of the lack thereof. In my view, which I cannot develop here at greater length, the Stoic account of positive freedom, which identifies positive freedom with *apátheia*, is implausible: arguably, it reflects the fear of or aversion to the unpredictability of human existence rather than 'true' positive freedom. For this reason, my account of positive freedom is not based directly on the Stoic account (though, apparently, it is not contradictory with this account).

A proposal of explication of the concept of positive freedom

I would like to propose two slightly different accounts of positive freedom which encompass the above partial accounts (except for the Stoic one); I shall call these two accounts '*the strong concept of positive freedom*' and '*the weak concept of positive freedom*.' I shall argue that the former is more plausible.

The *strong concept of positive freedom* assumes that an agent is positively free if and only if she satisfies the following four conditions (which, apparently, are not entirely independent): the Procedural Condition, the Axiological Condition, the Reality Principle Condition and the Non-*Akrasia* Condition. I construe these conditions as necessary conditions of positive freedom and their conjunction as a necessary and sufficient condition of positive freedom. They determine an ideal type of a positively free person: a person fully satisfying these four conditions can hardly ever be met in real life. However, for a person to be called 'positively free' it suffices if she satisfies *to a considerable degree* these four conditions. Let me now discuss these conditions at greater length.

(1) *The Procedural Condition* (incorporating the Marcusean and Nietzschean accounts): *an agent is positively free only if her goals – values to be realized by her – have been selected or at least endorsed by her as a result of her critical and autonomous (i.e. undisturbed by such external obstacles as e.g. manipulation, pressure, deceit, and such internal judgment-distorting obstacles as e.g. various psychological compulsions or resentment) reflection on reasons for the acceptance of these goals and for the acceptance of alternative goals, so that the goals chosen by her can be called really 'her own' goals.*

The Procedural Condition implies, *inter alia*, that one's choice of goals should not be made in ignorance and thereby should be made in awareness of a wide range of alternative goals. Besides, this condition implies that an agent is not positively free when the formation of her goals occurs through a process which she does not control, or with which she does not identify (e.g., when she is required to do something by physical force, when she is coerced by threats to do something, when her psyche is conditioned by subjecting her to systematic indoctrination, when goals are imposed on her by subliminal advertising).

(2) *The Axiological Condition* (incorporating the axiological account): *an agent is positively free only if she chooses values which occupy a high place in the hierarchy of objective values.*

This condition is undoubtedly controversial, as it implies the existence of some hierarchy of objective values. How can this condition be developed? I see two main approaches to this problem – the more ambitious but less plausible and the less ambitious but more plausible. The first approach consists of making an attempt to present some *complete* hierarchy of objective values. One may appeal in this context to subtle axiological analyses pursued by phenomenological philosophers, e.g. Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann, who have made interesting suggestions as to how a hierarchy of objective values looks like. For instance, Scheler presented the following hierarchy of value modalities (with their respective positive and negative forms): from *sensual* values of the agreeable and disagreeable (the lowest values) through *vital* values of the noble and vulgar and *spiritual* values of the beautiful and ugly, true and false, to the values of the *Holy* – of the Divine and Idols (the highest values).² What seems to be the main drawback of this approach is that it is overly ambitious: one may doubt if a hierarchy ordering all objective values, i.e. a complete hierarchy of objective values, really exists, and if it does exist, if it can be discovered by human beings. The second approach consists of abandoning the attempt to present a complete hierarchy of objective values and in confining oneself to presenting only a *partial* hierarchy of values, e.g. to providing some criteria for distinguishing between high and low values. One may appeal in this context to the account of creative goals (which may be identified with high values) proposed by Jon Elster.³ According to Elster, creative goals usually satisfy the following three conditions. First, they are subject to increasing marginal utility, i.e. they become more enjoyable, the more one has already engaged in realizing them. Thus, they are, for instance, opposite to passive consumption, since deriving sustained pleasure from passive consumption is possible only if the consumer has access to a diversity of goods. Second, they are esteemed by other people and thereby are the most important

² This hierarchy should be understood in the following way: the sensual value of the agreeable is the lowest value in the hierarchy of positive value modalities and the sensual value of the disagreeable is the lowest value in the hierarchy of negative value modalities, etc.; thus, the highest value in the hierarchy of negative value modalities is in fact the 'objectively lowest' value in the total hierarchy of values; it means, e.g., that pursuing the value of the false is morally more reprehensible (according to Scheler) than pursuing the value of the vulgar. See M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, Halle 1927 (first published in 1913).

³ See J. Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 45 and 194–195.

source of self-esteem. Third, they benefit other people. There seems to be also another important feature of creative goals not mentioned by Elster (but emphasized, e.g. by the eminent Polish philosopher Józef Tischner⁴), namely, that their realization is usually accompanied by an intense feeling of inner freedom. The occurrence of this feeling while realizing high values can be accounted for by the fact that these values are in a sense superfluous from the practical standpoint – their realization is not necessary for biological existence (or, to put it differently, for normal functioning in everyday existence). Consequently, their realization seems to be a manifestation of a developed capacity to transcend the basic level of human existence. Precisely such a transcending seems to be the main source of an intense feeling of inner freedom. In other words, in the face of low values (to quote Tischner) ‘an agent must more and can less,’ while in the face of high values ‘an agent must less and can more:’ an agent is in a way determined by her biological nature to realize low values, which is why her realization of these values can hardly be regarded as a manifestation of her positive freedom, while she is in no way determined to realize high values, which is why her realization of these values can plausibly be regarded as a manifestation of her positive freedom.

It is also worth noticing that the Axiological Condition developed in line with the first approach is obviously irreconcilable with Berlin’s thesis that many values are incommensurable (i.e. they cannot be ordered in a hierarchy) and incompatible (i.e. they cannot be realized at the same time), as this approach implies that *all* values are commensurable and thereby can be ordered in a hierarchy (though it does not imply that all values are compatible: it is hard to deny the fact that certain values, e.g. justice and mercy, fairness and welfare, temperance and courage can never – or at least seldom – be realized simultaneously). By contrast, the Axiological Condition developed in line with the second approach is more concordant with Berlin’s thesis, as this approach does not imply that *all* values are commensurable: it implies that some values are commensurable, so that we can distinguish between high and low values and thereby can provide a partial hierarchy of values, but it does not imply that high values themselves are commensurable and thereby does not imply that we can present a complete hierarchy of values, i.e. a hierarchy of *all* values.

(3) *The Reality Principle Condition* (incorporating the Socratic account): *an agent is positively free only if her beliefs regarding herself and the external world are true beliefs, i.e. if she has self-knowledge and the knowledge of the external world.*

I shall put forward three reasons for treating this condition as a condition of positive freedom. A pragmatic reason is that an agent whose beliefs are in fact various illusions regarding herself and the external world will fail to undertake utility-maximizing actions, i.e. will fail to be instrumentally rational (though it may be worth noticing that *moderate* self-deception, e.g. leading to overestimating one’s capacities, may in fact be conducive to an effective realization of one’s goals; some evolutionary biologists, e.g. Robert L. Trivers, claim that this kind

⁴ See, e.g., J. Tischner, *Spór o istnienie człowieka (A Controversy over the Existence of Man)*, Znak, Kraków 1998.

of self-deception may be a biological adaptation⁵); and an agent can hardly be viewed as positively free if her actions are self-defeating, i.e. if they tend to fail to produce effects which the agent has intended them to produce. An ‘analytical’ reason for treating this condition (in so far as it refers to self-knowledge) as a condition of positive freedom is that an agent who lacks self-knowledge – who is e.g. driven by motives unknown to her – can hardly be called ‘a true master of herself:’ it seems that a true master of herself must, by definition, possess acute self-knowledge. Thus, one can say that a positively free person must comply with the Freudian maxim ‘*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden.*’ An ethical reason is that it seems to be an ethical imperative that an agent should not ‘escape from reality:’ such an escape seems to be a symptom of the lack of positive freedom.

(4) The *Non-Akrasia Condition* (incorporating the *akrasia*-sensitive account and, arguably, the Platonic account): *an agent is positively free only if she does not suffer from akrasia.*

This condition needs clarification, because *akrasia* can be understood in many different ways. In the relevant literature one can find three main forms of *akrasia* which I shall call ‘*akrasia sensu stricto*,’ ‘*akrasia sensu largo*’ and ‘*akrasia sensu largissimo*.’ One can speak about *akrasia sensu stricto* with reference to a situation in which an agent did *x* rather than *y* at time *t* even though she was convinced at *t* that, all things considered, *x* was a better thing to do, and she was able to do *x* (which implies that she did not act compulsively). To put it briefly, *akrasia sensu stricto* is acting non-compulsively against one’s better judgment. *Akrasia sensu largo* embraces *akrasia sensu stricto* as well as acting compulsively against one’s better judgement. *Akrasia sensu largissimo* embraces the two preceding forms of *akrasia* as well as the failure by an agent to realize her resolutions due to her natural inclinations which the resolutions were supposed to counteract (this last form of akratic behaviour was clearly distinguished from the other two forms by Richard Holton⁶). The failure to realize one’s resolutions is dubbed ‘diachronic intrapersonal conflict’ as opposed to ‘synchronic intrapersonal conflict’ (which embraces non-compulsive and compulsive acts against one’s better judgment). It is not clear if *akrasia sensu stricto* is at all possible: its existence has been denied by many thinkers (e.g. by Socrates and Richard Hare). There is no doubt, though, that compulsive acts against one’s better judgment and failures to act on one’s resolutions are real and frequent phenomena. There is also no doubt that an agent who systematically displays such behaviours can hardly be called ‘positively free.’

The *weak concept of positive freedom* assumes that an agent is positively free if she satisfies the following three conditions: *the Procedural Condition, the Reality Principle Condition, the Non-Akrasia Condition.*

There arises the question of which of the two concepts of positive freedom is more plausible. As can be readily seen, the difference between these concepts is that the weak concept does not require that values chosen by the agent should

⁵ See R.L. Trivers, *The Elements of a Scientific Theory of Self-Deception* [in:] D. LeCroy and P. Moller (eds.), *Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Reproductive Behaviour*, New York Academy of Sciences, New York 2000, pp. 114–131.

⁶ See R. Holton, *Intention and Weakness of Will*, “The Journal of Philosophy” 1999, vol. 96, no. 5, pp. 241–262.

be high values, whereas the strong concept implies this requirement. Thus, the aforementioned question boils down in fact to the question about the plausibility of the Axiological Condition (arguably, the most controversial among the four conditions of positive freedom). As I have already argued, there are important reasons for assuming this condition. First, even though we may not be able to present a complete hierarchy of objective values (either because such a hierarchy does not exist or because we cannot know this hierarchy), we may be able to present a partial hierarchy of objective values which allows us to distinguish between high and low values. Second, and more importantly, the realization of high values gives rise to an especially strong feeling of inner freedom. An agent usually lacks this feeling – or experiences only its faint form – while realizing low values. Therefore, the realization of high values seems to be an important component of the phenomenon of positive freedom. Thus, the concept of positive freedom which is to reflect this phenomenon in all its complexity should allow for this condition.

Objections against positive freedom

I started this essay with the assertion that the objections raised against positive freedom – that it is irremediably vague, that it is unattractive as a personal ideal, and that it is dangerous as a political ideal – can be refuted. I hope that the above analyses constitute a refutation of the first objection. What remains to be done is to deal with the other two objections.

The objection saying that positive freedom is not attractive as a personal ideal is difficult to refute because it is difficult to provide criteria for assessing a given personal ideal – a given conception of good life – as attractive or unattractive. However, if one agrees that the notion of happiness construed (to paraphrase Glenn Gould's famous saying) not 'as the collection of momentary ejections of adrenaline but as the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity' might be one of such criteria, one could argue that the strong concept of positive freedom is an attractive ideal, because its realization seems to be especially conducive to thus construed happiness. This does not amount to saying that this ideal is entirely uncontroversial. I can imagine at least three lines of its critique.

First, it may be argued that this ideal cannot be realized: what an agent ought to be according to this ideal she cannot be. In other words, its attractions notwithstanding, the ideal of positive freedom is utopian, as it cannot be accomplished. The reason is, so this argument (which can be called 'the argument from unfeasibility') goes, because this ideal implies (in the form of its Procedural Condition) an untenable dualist view of the human self according to which the self occupies a transcendental realm from which it descends to the world of everyday experience to choose between various goals, whereas in fact we always acquire our goals within a specific way of life and thereby can never transcend all social and historical influences and choose our goals truly autonomously. Moreover, even if we could choose high values autonomously, we would rarely

realize them (as is required by the *Non-Akrasia Condition*), because such a realization requires us to manifest certain features, e.g. perseverance in developing one's creative potentialities and thereby the ability to delay gratification, with which most of us are rather poorly endowed. However, these two arguments are not very plausible. As for the first argument: the ideal of positive freedom does not imply the strongly dualistic self mentioned in this argument; it just requires that human beings reflectively and critically choose their goals. As for the second argument: one should concede that this ideal can never be fully realized but one should add that this argument is trivially correct, given that it seems to be a feature of probably all noble personal ideals – conceptions of good life – that they cannot be fully realized.

Second, one may argue that the realization of this ideal may give rise to conceit or arrogance. Indeed, it may be the case that an agent who is positively free but devoid of humility (which can be defined, tentatively, as an attitude towards life which consists in treating the goods of life not as something due but as gifts) may not be a very agreeable person. Thus, it may be the case that an even more attractive ideal is the one which combines the above four conditions constituting the strong concept of positive freedom with what may be called '*the Requirement of Humility*.'

Third, one may argue that the realization of some types of high values (e.g., some artistic achievements) might not have been possible if those who realized them had been endowed with full positive freedom, especially with acute self-knowledge and reflexivity, which are required by *The Reality Principle Condition* of positive freedom (for instance, as Berlin pointed out in his essay *From Hope and Fear Set Free*,⁷ van Gogh or Dostoyevsky might not have created their masterpieces if it had not been for their serious flaws in self-knowledge). This is undoubtedly true. However, the thesis that the ideal of positive freedom is attractive does not entail the untenable claim that there are no other valuable conceptions of good life.

At the end of this essay let me deal with the last objection against positive freedom – the objection saying that positive freedom is dangerous as a political ideal. As I have already mentioned, Berlin maintained that the concept of positive freedom is dangerous as a political ideal, because it can be used to justify the limitations of our negative freedom for the sake of the realization of 'our true self' in case (real or imagined) we cannot achieve the level of 'our true or *noumenal* self' by our own efforts. Berlin's scepticism towards positive freedom, however, seems to be justified only with reference to *some* accounts of positive freedom, namely, those that posit some distinction between the 'true or *noumenal* self' and 'the empirical self,' not with reference to all accounts of positive freedom. Apparently, the account of positive freedom proposed in this essay cannot be used to justify the imposition of constraints on our negative freedom, because this account includes the Procedural Condition, which requires that agents select their goals – values to be realized by them – as a result of their autonomous deliberations, i.e. deliberations pursued in the absence of any external coercion.

⁷ This essay can be found in a collection of Isaiah Berlin's essays *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, Hogarth Press, London 1978.

However, this argument only shows that positive freedom is not dangerous as a political ideal. I think, though, that a stronger claim can be made, namely, the claim that positive freedom is not only non-dangerous as a political ideal but is also attractive as a political ideal. The political ideal of positive freedom can be interpreted either as an imperative addressed directly to the state to pursue a policy which favours the flourishing of positively free individuals or, more moderately, just as a criterion of evaluating social orders. The latter interpretation seems to be more reasonable, because it is rather difficult to say how the realization of this ideal by the state ought to look like in practice. Moreover, and more importantly, one may argue (from the perspective of an adherent of liberalism) that it is not possible to reconcile liberalism (which assumes that the state should not support any conception of good life but, rather, should create conditions for developing various conceptions of good life) with the suggestion that the state should pursue the ideal of positive freedom – one of many (even if especially attractive) conceptions of good life. For all these reasons the second interpretation seems to be more convincing. What stands behind the claim that the ideal of positive freedom may be treated as a criterion of evaluating social orders is a plausible (at least *prima facie*) axiological intuition that the more a given social order is conducive to the flourishing of positively free individuals, the more valuable it is.