

# Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?

Written by Edward F Smith

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/12/30/does-a-positive-definition-of-liberty-inevitably-lead-to-an-excuse-for-tyranny-and-totalitarianism/>

EDWARD F SMITH, DEC 30 2011

As an essay regarding political theory may seem a little out of place on e-International Relations. However, what world leaders (individuals and administrations as a whole) regard 'freedom', 'equality', 'justice' (and the like) to mean, has vast effects to both domestic and international affairs. The substantive impact of conceptions of liberty is what initially drove Isaiah Berlin to make his famous inaugural lecture 'Two Concepts on Liberty' (where he first outlined the positive-negative distinction and warned about the perversions of positive liberty).

This essay is important for this very reason. Whilst Berlin (1998, pp.92-93) later recognised that "properly conceived" positive liberty is a "perfectly good form of liberty", the positive account has tended to become necessarily linked with regimes that were typified, to use Berlin's words, as "total despotism, the crushing of all ideas, the crushing of life and thought". This link is not only flawed, but is also dangerous. The misconception can readily be found influencing political discourse, Fox news is a clear example of its use. The pervasive and extreme negative account of liberty that has often followed is one that even Berlin (a staunch advocate of negative liberty) admitted that such a conception could have dire consequences: "the suffering of children in coal mines or poverty" (1998, p.93). Furthermore, with an increasing wealth gap and its many moral implications being felt both domestically (within the United States for example) and internationally the repudiation of any argument that could possibly fuel them is therefore a very significant task of conceptual clarification.

—

A positive definition of liberty does not inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism. To demonstrate this I will firstly clarify what nature of scenario would be 'tyrannical' and what is meant by an 'excuse' for it from positive liberty. I will then outline the major steps of the "tyranny argument" (Christman, 1991) [the argument directly opposed to my hypothesis] and discuss why different positive conceptions vary in their ability to respond. Penultimately I will argue that the need for an additional assumption, outside of those derived solely from the positive definition, to make the logical progression intended in the tyranny argument, proves my hypothesis that tyranny does not necessarily follow from positive freedom. Finally, I will respond to two major criticisms that can be levelled at my argument, first on the grounds that I insufficiently represent positive conceptions of liberty and secondly that I am too constrictive about the nature of tyranny.

For the purposes of this essay a scenario that counts as tyrannical is one in which *individuals or collectives (for example a government) are in a position in which have power to exercise lasting control over an individual's actions*. I recognise that this definition is highly contentious and so requires further justification, however I will do so later in the essay.

Similarly if the positive definition of liberty creates an 'excuse' for tyranny it means that there is a logical progression from one to the other. The term 'excuse' may be equatable to: 'a logical reason'. [1]

### 1. The Tyranny Argument

# Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?

Written by Edward F Smith

The deductive reasoning that forms a progression from a positive definition of liberty to an excuse of tyranny can be represented as comprising of three major steps.

## 1.1 Step One

The first step simply consists of determining what principles are fundamental to a positive definition of liberty. In combination these form the necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes a positive account of freedom. At the heart of every positive account of liberty is the notion of self-mastery or self-realisation: that being free depends on the level of control you have over your life; or as Taylor (1979, p.213) states "one is only free to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one's life". As Taylor (1979, p.213) identifies, this makes any positive definition of freedom necessarily an "exercise-concept", it regards what one does, wants to do and why one does it, as opposed to a solely "opportunity-concept" [what is open for one to do].

Similarly, it is almost equally fundamental for positive theories to identify that external forces can affect self-mastery in obscure ways. As Christman (1991, p.345) notes: to satisfy self-mastery, "the free person must be guided by values that are their own". It is logical to recognise that external influences can have large effects on people's motivations, to the extent that they are not guided by their own values and are consequently unfree. To determine whether a motivation has been guided by an individual's own values, one must identify that it has been conceived by them in a "clear-headed manner" (Christman, 1991), one where external forces could not have acted as "reflection-inhibiting factors" (Christman, 1991) and prevented them exercising self-mastery.

## 1.2 Step Two

From these principles we can move to determining under what conditions, from a positive perspective, a person would be unfree. Clearly if an external force is preventing us from doing something that we want to do, it is limiting the extent to which we can shape our life and so we are, to some degree, unfree.

Additionally, from the second principle, we can conceive of more specific cases of unfreedom. Situations often arise when an individual has to make a decision between a number of things that appeal to them: they have competing 'motives'. Some of these decisions are matters of simple taste, what flavour of ice cream to pick for example (the motivations for picking either are not morally relevant and the outcome of the decision has no moral significance). However, in other cases where motives compete there is a moral significance to following one of the motives over the other. Of course the importance of these motives could be due to other concerns and not the fact that one will result in unfreedom. In some cases, however, it is recognisable that, at least part of why we identify that motives are superior (or inferior) is that they are a result of the individuals own desires (as opposed to external reflection-inhibiting factors). As such the individual would be closer to self-mastery (more free) if he followed the motive which was not unfairly influenced by reflection-inhibiting factors and further from self-mastery (less free) if he acted on one that was.

For example let us assume that an individual is an alcoholic but is also aware of the health risks of alcohol and would like to live a long life. He therefore needs to make a decision between competing motives: whether he satisfies his urges for liquor or tries to quit and reduce the damage to his health. If we assume that the agent only wants to drink because of the physical urges of his addiction (as opposed to thinking he wanted to be an addict and made the decision free of reflective-inhibiting factors) we can identify his addiction as a reflective-inhibiting factor of the thing he personally values - his health. He is not his own master whilst he is influenced by this reflective-inhibiting factor and so would be freer if he quit.

## 1.3 Step Three

This step of the tyranny argument consists of the assertion that an agent or collective, external to the individual, could intervene and force the individual to follow the correct motive and by doing so increase their freedom. To use the example of the unwilling alcoholic outlined earlier, if an external agent forced the addict to quit (by locking him in rehab for example) he would remove the reflective-inhibiting factor, hence allowing him to follow the other motive which was a result of his true desire, therefore making him more free. Furthermore, if this external agent or collective

# Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?

Written by Edward F Smith

was better than the individual himself at distinguishing between which motives resulted from the individuals own values and which were influenced by external factors, they would make that individual the more free, overall, if they could exert lasting control over what decisions the individual made. Similarly, if an external agent or collective were better at distinguishing motives than all (or at least a majority) of the people in a society then it is possible to claim that they could increase the total level of freedom in that society if they had lasting power over it as a whole. In other words, an external agent or collective could, from a positive conception of liberty, occupy a position of tyranny in the interests of freedom.

## 2. The Break-down of the Progression

### 2.1 Superior and Sufficient Knowledge Conditions

However this progression is flawed. The third step [1.3], in which the final connection is made to tyranny, does not logically follow on from the second unless the following assumption (which I will from now on to refer to as the *superior knowledge condition*) is made:

*That an external agent or collective is better than the individual himself, at distinguish between which motives resulted from the individuals own values and which were influenced by external factors.*

This also rests on an additional assumption: that the values that an individual agent has are not entirely subjective and instead will necessarily align with an external objective standard, for example morality. In Christman's (1991, p.350) words, this is to assume that there is an "external rationality condition" to self-mastery: that the content of an individual's 'true' motives conform "to the correct values as well as facts".

If we accept this further assumption, then it is conceivable that an external agent could know enough about what would constitute a 'true' motive to satisfy the superior knowledge condition. Still, if an external agent was to justify being able to exert a control over an individual, time and time again (hence satisfy the *lasting* nature of power that I defined as tyrannical) in the of name their freedom, he would have to satisfy the superior knowledge condition in a substantial proportion of occasions. Conceivably the "range of [such] cases will be minimal" (Christman, 1991) and hence it seems unlikely that a positive conception of freedom could warrant the external agent to hold a position of tyranny.

Yet, this is still problematic for a positive defence of the tyranny argument, as it overestimates the significance of probability in philosophical analysis. We are not concerned with how likely it is that, in physical reality, an excuse for tyranny (based on a positive conception of liberty) would be justified, simply that it could be. Therefore, if it is reasonable to conceive that if even a single case exists, has existed, or will exist, where one individual could satisfy the superior knowledge condition (in a substantial proportion of occasions) regarding another's freedom, it is sufficient to make the link between a positive definition of liberty and a scenario of tyranny logically inevitable. Considering the amount of individuals who exist, has existed or will exist, it would be absurd to believe that this would not be the case.

Therefore to accurately represent the nature of the assumption linking the second and third stages of the tyranny argument, it is important to refine the superior knowledge condition to being:

*There exists at least a single case, where an external agent or collective is sufficiently better than the individual himself, at distinguish between which motives resulted from the individuals own values and which were influenced by external factors, so that he could justify remaining in a position of lasting control over the individual.*

I will call this the *sufficient knowledge condition*.

### 2.2 Subjectivity and the Sufficient Knowledge Condition

# Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?

Written by Edward F Smith

Crucially though nothing so far would affect my hypothesis, because *a progression from a positive liberty to tyranny can only become causally necessary if it was solely formed from assumptions which are necessary to a positive definition*. An external rationality condition is not fundamental or necessary to a positive account of freedom; as discussed in the first step [1.1], positive liberty is fundamentally concerned with self-mastery. The key aspect of this dynamic is the relation between the individual's values and action's. We can conceive of this link without claiming that those values conform to an external standard. To use Christman's (1991, pp.358-359) terminology, it is not the "content" of an individual's motives but their "procedural conditions" that specifies the extent to which that individual "has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one's life" (Taylor, 1979) and therefore how free they are.

Without the additional assumption of an external rational condition, the logical progression from a positive account of liberty to situations of tyranny breaks down. This is because the the third step of the tyranny argument [1.3] depends on the satisfaction of the sufficient knowledge condition, to link the discrimination of motives, to a tyrannical scenario. As a positive definition of liberty only necessarily discriminates between motives based on their origin, to satisfy the sufficient knowledge condition, the external agent has to have significantly more knowledge about how the individual would want to shape himself and his life than the individual would. This, as Christman (1991, p.355) asserts, is a "practical impossibility". Self-mastery is an internal notion, and is entirely subjective to the individual. Therefore, unlike when we previously considered a positive conception and assumed external rational conditions, we cannot conceive that even a single case exists, has existed, or will exist, in which an individual could satisfy the sufficient knowledge condition. Accordingly no link can be made between the discrimination of desires, based on the principle of a positive conception of liberty, to a tyrannical scenario.

## 3. Challenges

I will now briefly address two major possible criticisms that could be mounted against my argument.

### 3.1 Characterisation of Positive Liberty

The first regards my decision to exclude external rational conditions from what makes up a positive definition of liberty. Arguably, although they are not necessary for a conception of liberty to be positive, those conceptions that include external rational conditions can be perfectly sufficient. Therefore, as these 'inclusive' conceptions form a prominent part (especially historically) of the family of positive conceptions, it is contradictory that I both exclude this significant proportion and at the same time assert, as I do, to have given an reasonably accurate account of the relationship between positive liberty and tyranny.

This challenge fails for two major reasons.

Firstly it confuses my exclusion of the inclusive positive conceptions, from the definition of what is necessarily a positive account of liberty, with a failure to investigate the relationship between tyranny and these conceptions. I did not exclude these conceptions from the definition of liberty, I simply excluded them being necessary to the definition, which they are not. Furthermore considering that my hypothesis concerns whether the progression from it to tyranny is 'inevitable' it was important to focus on those conceptions that did not, as they alone provide sufficient grounds for affirming it.

Secondly, even if I had excluded the inclusive conceptions, I would not consider it contradictory to claim that I could still give a reasonable account of the tyranny and positive liberty relationship, simply because they do not add anything worthwhile to the positive 'family'. The inclusive positive conceptions rest on a fundamental misconception of the nature of mankind: that anything and everything of moral significance can be represented by some all-encompassing meta-theory. Kant depicted this flaw particularly eloquently when he asserts that "out of crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made" (Kant, 1784 cited in Berlin, 1958, p.31) The failure of those philosophers who make this misconception and so do not recognise the complex and irregular nature of distinct moral notions is unacceptable, not because they are wrong, but because, as Berlin (1958, p.1) insists, they are

# Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?

Written by Edward F Smith

“oddly unaware of these devastating effects of their activities”; like providing an excuse for tyranny in the name of freedom.

## 3.2 Characterisation of ‘Tyranny’

The second criticism maintains that I am only successful in defending my hypothesis because I used a very limited notion of ‘tyranny’ and that its true nature is much more expansive. As a result, even though my hypothesis is correct, it has very little to say about the relationship between tyranny and positive liberty and so my essay has done little of significance. For example, although an individualist positive conception cannot lead to an excuse for an external forceful control of an individual’s actions, it “might still be allowed considerable space for intervention of an informative and educational nature” (Carter, 2003). Considering the susceptibility of self-mastery to external influences, it is conceivable that these factors could possibly act as limits to freedom.

However I do not think that conditions of unfreedom are alone sufficient to make a situation tyrannical. ‘Tyranny’ is a heavily-morally loaded term; however, whilst freedom clearly has moral significance, it is easy to conceive of situations which we think of as morally justified in which someone is unfree. There are significantly less cases, if any at all, which are tyrannical but that we could conceive as being justified, they are “morally intolerable arrangements” (Steiner, 1983). Therefore, although it is possible that I could learn different things by expanding the notion of tyranny, I believe that, considering the historical relationship between tyranny and positive freedom, there is plenty of importance that can be ascertained about their relationship by keeping a more focused definition.

Therefore I conclude that the tyranny argument can be successful in making a logical progression from a positive definition of liberty, to a situation that is linguistically similar to situations of tyranny. However this is only the case if an additional assumption is made: that an agent’s true desires will conform to some externally measurable standard. Not only is this assumption unnecessary for a positive definition of liberty but is also illogical and so possibly not even sufficient for a reasonable positive conception. Therefore, a positive definition of liberty does not inevitably lead to conditions of tyranny.

## Bibliography

Berlin, I., 1958. Two Concepts of Liberty. In: I. Berlin, 1969. *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berlin, I., 1998. *In Conversation with Steven Lukes* Interviewed by... Steven Lukes [Article] *Salmagundi*, No. 120 (Fall 1998), pp. 52-134.

Carter, I., 2003. *Positive and Negative Liberty* . [online] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Available at: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>> [Accessed 14 October 2011].

Christman, J., 1991. Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom. *Ethics*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 343-359.

Steiner, H., 1983. How Free: Computing Personal Liberty. In A. Phillips Griffiths. *Of Liberty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, C., 1979. What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty. In A. Ryan. *The Idea of Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.175-93.

[1] It is important not to over-reach what is meant by this progression. Whilst a logical progression from an a conception of freedom to a situation of tyranny implies that, solely on the grounds of freedom, the latter is justified, freedom is not the only concept of moral significance. So, regardless of how strong the link, this does not constitute a *moral justification* of a tyrannical situation. Likewise, we must avoid being too conservative. My definition is arguably

# **Does a positive definition of liberty inevitably lead to an excuse for tyranny and totalitarianism?**

Written by Edward F Smith

an over-extension of the regular use of the term, however if we were to consider 'excuse' to mean something more alike to 'what an agent gives as a logical reason for doing something' we will say little [if anything] of significance regarding positive liberty and its real effects in the world.

—  
*Written by: Edward F Smith*  
*Written at: The University of Manchester*  
*Written for: Dr Jonathan Quong*  
*Revised: February 2012*