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Political Science Qual Proposal
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NEGATIVE LIBERTY

The concept of liberty and its role in politics has a long history of contention. Arguments pertaining to liberty take many forms. These arguments may attempt to define the qualities that best characterize liberty, evaluate liberties benefits and detriments, or determine which forms of governance ensure liberty.

Isaiah Berlin was the first to draw attention to what he considered to be two opposing, incommensurable forms of liberty.¹ Berlin advocated negative liberty, which he defined as the absence of constraint on individuals. Negative liberty is the liberty from external forces. Any just state or political order must have explicit limits on the extent that it is allowed to constrain an individual's actions. Conversely, positive liberty is concerned with developing human faculties to the fullest and is achieved through collective control of the common life. Berlin rejects positive liberty on the grounds that it may easily turn a government into a totalitarian regime. If the development of man is based on reason, as proponents of positive liberty often claim, then there must be agreement as to the true end of development. "The ends and means of development must be universally harmonious."² Because some individuals are more rational than others, for the benefit of all, the rational may determine the correct way of life for the irrational. The promise of obtaining the ideal human condition is easily corrupted by those who claim to have the best interests of society in mind. The conviction of one true way of life introduces the potential for oppressive totalitarianism.

¹ Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology. Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1997.

² Ibid. 404.

Advocates of a positive account of liberty argue that people are constrained by their own natural desires. Whereas negative liberty is concerned with external constraint, positive liberty considers internal conditions that may prevent one from being free. An individual cannot be free if he is subjected to impulses and cravings that he cannot control. Personal development and self-mastery are necessary for true liberty. Often, individuals are ignorant to the necessity of reform and are in need of guidance. Positive liberals argue that it may be the obligation of others to coerce the ignorant into true freedom. Charles Taylor contributes to the negative positive liberty distinction by arguing that positive freedom is an exercise-concept, while negative liberty is an opportunity-concept.³ Liberty depends on self-realization and some form of qualitative discrimination of motives. If we naturally discriminate motives, as Taylor argues, then it is necessary that the judgment be based on self-reflection. Taylor argues that Berlin and negative liberals are paralyzed by a fear of totalitarianism, when instead we must confront these theories directly.

Is Isaiah Berlin's theory of the proper value of negative liberty a good theory? More specifically, does negative liberty provide a good way to envision and assess a political system of free individuals? I will use Isaiah Berlin's essay *Two Concepts of Liberty* as the primary articulation of negative liberty. Because the literature on liberty is immense, I will narrow my scope of study to works that either directly advocate or contest negative liberty. With these sources, I intend to critically review the role of negative freedom in political theory.

³ Taylor, Charles. "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" *The Idea of Freedom*. Ed. Alan Ryan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.