

# Two Concepts of Liberty

by Isaiah Berlin  
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1 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 of emancipation of a nation or race  
or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the  
5 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 pronounc-  
ments of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man,  
there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the  
positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible,  
10 and perhaps even entail one another. “Nature binds truth, happiness, and virtue  
together as by an indissoluble chain,” said one of the best men who ever lived,  
and spoke in similar terms of liberty, equality, and justice. But is this true? It is a  
commonplace that neither political equality nor efficient organization nor social  
justice is compatible with more than a modicum of individual liberty, and cer-  
15 tainly not with unrestricted *laissez-faire*; that justice and generosity, public and  
private loyalties, the demands of genius and the claims of society, can conflict  
violently with each other. And it is no great way from that to the generalization  
that not all good things are compatible, still less all the ideals of mankind. But  
somewhere, we shall be told, and in some way, it must be possible for all these  
20 values to live together, for unless this is so, the universe is not a cosmos, not a  
harmony; unless this is so, conflicts of values may be an intrinsic, irremovable  
element in human life. To admit that the fulfillment of some of our ideals may  
in principle make the fulfillment of others impossible is to say that the notion of  
total human fulfillment is a formal contradiction, a metaphysical chimaera. For  
25 every rationalist metaphysician, from Plato to the last disciples of Hegel or Marx,  
this abandonment of the notion of a final harmony in which all riddles are solved,  
all contradictions reconciled, is a piece of crude empiricism, abdication before  
brute facts, intolerable bankruptcy of reason before things as they are, failure to  
explain and to justify, to reduce everything to a system, which “reason” indig-  
30 nantly rejects. But if we are not armed with an a priori guarantee of the proposi-  
tion that a total harmony of true values is somewhere to be found — perhaps in  
some ideal realm the characteristics of which we can, in our finite state, not so  
much as conceive — we must fall back on the ordinary resources of empirical

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1 observation and ordinary human knowledge. And these certainly give us no  
warrant for supposing (or even understanding what would be meant by saying)  
that all good things, or all bad things for that matter, are reconcilable with each  
other. The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are  
5 faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute,  
the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others.  
Indeed, it is because this is their situation that men place such immense value  
upon the freedom to choose; for if they had assurance that in some perfect state,  
realizable by men on earth, no ends pursued by them would ever be in conflict, the  
10 necessity and agony of choice would disappear, and with it the central importance  
of the freedom to choose. Any method of bringing this final state nearer would  
then seem fully justified, no matter how much freedom were sacrificed to forward  
its advance. It is, I have no doubt, some such dogmatic certainty that has been  
responsible for the deep, serene, unshakeable conviction in the minds of some of  
15 the most merciless tyrants and persecutors in history that what they did was fully  
justified by its purpose. I do not say that the ideal of self-perfection — whether  
for individuals or nations or churches or classes — is to be condemned in itself,  
or that the language which was used in its defence was in all cases the result of a  
confused or fraudulent use of words, or of moral or intellectual perversity. Indeed,  
20 I have tried to show that it is the notion of freedom in its “positive” sense that is  
at the heart of the demands for national or social self-direction which animate the  
most powerful and morally just public movements of our time, and that not to  
recognize this is to misunderstand the most vital facts and ideas of our age. But  
equally it seems to me that the belief that some single formula can in principle  
25 be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realized is  
demonstrably false. If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them  
are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict — and  
of tragedy — can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or  
social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable  
30 characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom as Acton  
had conceived of it — as an end in itself, and not as a temporary need, arising  
out of our confused notions and irrational and disordered lives, a predicament  
which a panacea could one day put right.

I do not wish to say that individual freedom is, even in the most liberal societies,  
35 the sole, or even the dominant, criterion of social action. We compel children to be  
educated, and we forbid public executions. These are certainly curbs to freedom.  
We justify them on the ground that ignorance, or a barbarian upbringing, or cruel  
pleasures and excitements are worse for us than the amount of restraint needed  
to repress them. This judgment in turn depends on how we determine good and  
40 evil, that is to say, on our moral, religious, intellectual, economic, and aesthetic  
values; which are, in their turn, bound up with our conception of man, and of  
the basic demands of his nature. In other words, our solution of such problems  
is based on our vision, by which we are consciously or unconsciously guided, of  
what constitutes a fulfilled human life, as contrasted with Mill's “cramped and

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1 warped,” “pinched and hidebound” natures. To protest against the laws govern-  
ing censorship or personal morals as intolerable infringements of personal liberty  
presupposes a belief that the activities which such laws forbid are fundamental  
needs of men as men, in a good (or, indeed, any) society. To defend such laws is  
5 to hold that these needs are not essential, or that they cannot be satisfied with-  
out sacrificing other values which come higher — satisfy deeper needs — than  
individual freedom, determined by some standard that is not merely subjective, a  
standard for which some objective status — empirical or a priori — is claimed.

The extent of a man’s, or a people’s, liberty to choose to live as they desire must  
10 be weighed against the claims of many other values, of which equality, or justice,  
or happiness, or security, or public order are perhaps the most obvious examples.  
For this reason, it cannot be unlimited. We are rightly reminded by R. H. Tawney  
that the liberty of the strong, whether their strength is physical or economic,  
must be restrained. This maxim claims respect, not as a consequence of some a  
15 priori rule, whereby the respect for the liberty of one man logically entails respect  
for the liberty of others like him but simply because respect for the principles of  
justice, or shame at gross inequality of treatment, is as basic in men as the desire  
for liberty. That we cannot have everything is a necessary, not a contingent, truth.  
Burke’s plea for the constant need to compensate, to reconcile, to balance; Mill’s  
20 plea for novel “experiments in living” with their permanent possibility of error,  
the knowledge that it is not merely in practice but in principle impossible to reach  
clear-cut and certain answers, even in an ideal world of wholly good and rational  
men and wholly clear ideas — may madden those who seek for final solutions  
and single, all-embracing systems, guaranteed to be eternal. Nevertheless, it is a  
25 conclusion that cannot be escaped by those who, with Kant, have learnt the truth  
that out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.

There is little need to stress the fact that monism, and faith in a single crite-  
rion, has always proved a deep source of satisfaction both to the intellect and to  
the emotions. Whether the standard of judgment derives from the vision of some  
30 future perfection, as in the minds of the philosophes in the eighteenth century  
and their technocratic successors in our own day, or is rooted in the past — la  
terre et les morts — as maintained by German historicists or French theocrats,  
or neo-Conservatives in English-speaking countries, it is bound, provided it  
is inflexible enough, to encounter some unforeseen and unforeseeable human  
35 development, which it will not fit; and will then be used to justify the a priori  
barbarities of Procrustes — the vivisection of actual human societies into some  
fixed pattern dictated by our fallible understanding of a largely imaginary past  
or a wholly imaginary future. To preserve our absolute categories or ideals at the  
expense of human lives offends equally against the principles of science and of  
40 history; it is an attitude found in equal measure on the right and left wings in our  
days, and is not reconcilable with the principles accepted by those who respect  
the facts.

Pluralism, with the measure of “negative” liberty that it entails, seems to me  
a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great,

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1 disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of “positive” self-mastery by classes,  
or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer, because it does, at least, recognize  
the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in per-  
petual rivalry with one another. To assume that all values can be graded on one  
5 scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest, seems to  
me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision  
as an operation which a slide rule could, in principle, perform. To say that in some  
ultimate, all-reconciling, yet realizable synthesis, duty is interest, or individual  
freedom is pure democracy or an authoritarian state, is to throw a metaphysical  
10 blanket over either self-deceit or deliberate hypocrisy. It is more humane because  
it does not (as the system builders do) deprive men, in the name of some remote,  
or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their  
life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings. In the end, men choose  
between ultimate values; they choose as they do, because their life and thought  
15 are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are, at any  
rate over large stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and  
sense of their own identity; part of what makes them human.

It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal  
validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the  
20 late fruit of our declining capitalist civilization: an ideal which remote ages and  
primitive societies have not recognized, and one which posterity will regard with  
curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension. This may be so; but no scepti-  
cal conclusions seem to me to follow. Principles are not less sacred because their  
duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our  
25 values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving  
for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past. “To  
realize the relative validity of one’s convictions,” said an admirable writer of our  
time, “and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man  
from a barbarian.” To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable  
30 metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an  
equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.