

# Berlin's Methodological Parsimony

DANIEL M. WEINSTOCK\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Thus far there have been two phases in the critical reception of Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty (Two Concepts)*.<sup>1</sup> The first saw the argument for negative liberty as being primarily negative and consequentialist in nature. It was seen as a negative, in that much of the philosophical work in the essay was concerned with pointing out the limitations of negative liberty's positive counterpart. It was consequentialist, in that what was seen to be wanting with positive liberty was not inherent to the concept itself, but rather had to do with its potentially noxious political implications.

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\* Professor, Département de philosophie, Université de Montréal. This paper was presented at the Law Faculty of the University of Ottawa; at the Conference on Isaiah Berlin, Value Pluralism, and the Law at the University of San Diego School of Law; and as a plenary address to the annual conference of the Graduate Student Association of Concordia University's Philosophy Department. I wish to thank audiences at all of these events for their comments and discussions. In particular, I wish to thank Charles-Maxime Panaccio and Adam Kolber for their extensive written comments.

1. ISAIAH BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in *FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY* 118 (1969).

Read in this manner, the argument contained in the essay has not aged particularly well. The Cold War context that inspired this line of argument and interpretation is now part of history, and so this reading of the text risks relegating it to merely antiquarian interest, alongside such other Cold War texts as Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*<sup>2</sup> and J.L. Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*.<sup>3</sup>

A second period of philosophical reception of the text dug philosophically deeper. Concentrating on the final section of the text, commentators such as George Crowder pointed out the connection between the value pluralism expounded there and the defense of negative liberty. To rehearse the argument in a nutshell, if values are irreducibly plural, then human agents navigating through this plurality need a measure of negative liberty in order to fashion a life for themselves out of the many equally plausible ways that there are of combining these values into a flourishing human life.<sup>4</sup> Taking his bearings from the same value pluralism, John Gray famously saw Berlin as laying the foundation for a postliberal politics, one from which Berlin himself ultimately shied away.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I want to suggest a third line of argument that can be retrieved from *Two Concepts*. It is primarily *methodological*. It enjoins political theorists to define the extension of normative concepts in a manner that makes as perspicuous as possible the various normative considerations that are relevant to political decisionmaking. Although related to the pluralist defense of negative freedom briefly alluded to above, I will suggest that it is distinct from it, and that it allows us to address important but underappreciated lacunae that beset the argument from value pluralism, as well as the argument according to which negative liberty is on consequentialist grounds to be preferred to positive liberty.

I will proceed as follows. I will first lay out the argument as I believe that it can be extracted from *Two Concepts* and from Berlin's work more broadly. I will then provide three independent arguments that I believe can be mounted in favour of the principle of methodological parsimony that I will be ascribing to Berlin. In a third part, I will distinguish the

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2. KARL R. POPPER, *THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES* (5th ed. rev. 1966).

3. J.L. TALMON, *THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIAN DEMOCRACY* (1960). For a recent reading of *Two Concepts of Liberty* along these lines, see James Tully, *Two Concepts of Liberty in Context* (Oct. 18, 2008) (unpublished manuscript, presented at the Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" 50 Years Later Conference held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver).

4. See, e.g., GEORGE CROWDER, *ISAIAH BERLIN: LIBERTY AND PLURALISM* (2004). See also Daniel Weinstock, *The Graying of Berlin*, 11 *CRITICAL REV.* 481, 487–89 (1997).

5. JOHN GRAY, *ISAIAH BERLIN* 145–46 (1996).

argument from methodological parsimony from the argument from pluralism. I will show that the former argument provides better grounds than does the latter for negative rather than positive liberty. I will also show that it provides a needed complement to the consequentialist argument against positive liberty that, as I suggested, corresponds with the first period of critical reception. Throughout, I will show that the principle of methodological pluralism provides a needed corrective to contemporary theories of freedom situated *within* the negative liberty family that do not satisfy the criterion of parsimony advocated by Berlin in *Two Concepts*.

## II. BERLIN'S ARGUMENT FOR METHODOLOGICAL PARSIMONY: A RECONSTRUCTION

Let me begin by quoting from a very well-known early section of *Two Concepts*:

Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience. If the liberty of myself or my class or nation depends on the misery of a number of other human beings, the system which promotes this is unjust and immoral. But if I curtail or lose my freedom, in order to lessen the shame of such inequality, and do not thereby materially increase the individual liberty of others, an absolute loss of liberty occurs.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, this may seem like merely a statement of the value pluralism that Berlin expounds in greater detail in the final section of the essay. There are a variety of values, Berlin is saying, and it is a mistake to conflate them, or to suppose that they all somehow hang together in one intellectually and morally satisfying whole.

This is of course partly true, but I want to suggest that something slightly different is going on in this passage. To see this, let me distinguish between four different kinds of philosophical theses that are relevant to the overall task of devising a philosophically satisfying pluralist theory, but that must nonetheless be clearly distinguished.

First, value pluralism is a *metaethical* thesis. It claims that there are a variety of ends worthy of human pursuit, and that they cannot be expressed according to a unifying single metric. It is in this manner opposed to *monism*, which is the claim that the plurality of values is only

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6. BERLIN, *supra* note 1, at 125.

apparent.<sup>7</sup> It is also opposed to *relativism*, which is the view that there is no rational way to adjudicate among the very many considerations that different people and groups take to be values. As such, value pluralism is a cognitivist position, according to which reason can allow us to distinguish real and sham values, but that it cannot express all real values in terms of one metavalue.

Second, it is important to see that metaethical pluralism is agnostic on questions of ontology. Some pluralists may believe that values are real, that is, independent of human willing and desire. Some may be constructivists. Constructivists believe that values do not exist independently of the operations of the human mind.<sup>8</sup>

Third, value pluralism as a metaethical thesis is agnostic as between different *first-order* pluralist theories. That is, it tells us that there *are* many different values, but it does not tell us what these values are. Pluralists may agree on metaethical and even on ontological matters but differ completely at the substantive level at which the variety of values that there are specified.

Finally, and relatedly, there are questions of *discovery*. How do we go about discovering the values that there are? Many pluralists have historically been intuitionists—Sir W. David Ross<sup>9</sup>—and though intuitionism is still philosophically alive—most notably in the writings of Robert Audi<sup>10</sup>—it has been on the defensive especially in light of the criticisms leveled against it by John Rawls.<sup>11</sup> The problem is that it is not clear which alternative method of inquiry pluralists can mobilize other than recourse to intuition in order to carry out the important task of constructing substantive pluralist theories. Thus, for example, one pluralist theory that has received a great deal of philosophical attention in recent years, the capabilities theory associated with the work of Amartya Sen and of Martha Nussbaum,<sup>12</sup> has been plagued by its inability to come up with a philosophically convincing account of the kinds capabilities that there are.

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7. A prominent contemporary exponent of a pluralist metaethics is Michael Stocker. *See, e.g.*, MICHAEL STOCKER, *PLURAL AND CONFLICTING VALUES* (1990).

8. A leading constructivist is John Rawls. *See, e.g.*, JOHN RAWLS, *Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory*, in *COLLECTED PAPERS* 303 (Samuel Freeman ed., 1999).

9. *E.g.*, W. DAVID ROSS, *FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS* (1939).

10. *E.g.*, ROBERT AUDI, *THE GOOD IN THE RIGHT: A THEORY OF INTUITION AND INTRINSIC VALUE* (2004).

11. JOHN RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* 34–40 (1971).

12. *See, e.g.*, AMARTYA SEN, *INEQUALITY REEXAMINED* (1992). *See also* MARTHA NUSSBAUM, *Aristotelian Social Democracy*, in *LIBERALISM AND THE GOOD* 203 (R. Bruce Douglass et al. eds., 1990).

Where does Berlin stand on these various issues? Berlin is not a systematic philosopher, and *Two Concepts* does not lay out a fully developed ethical theory. But there are elements of Berlin's overall philosophical strategy that allow us to make some headway.

First, and most importantly, whatever one thinks of the consequentialist argument leveled by Berlin against positive liberty, it matters to my purposes that it *is* a consequentialist, rather than an a priori, conceptual argument. Berlin is not ruling the positive sense of freedom out of conceptual court as somehow incoherent or self-contradictory. Rather, he is claiming that it lends itself more readily than its negative counterpart does to political abuses. The way in which we delineate and rank values must therefore to some degree be sensitive to the uses to which such values can be put. This suggests that for Berlin the values that we choose to include in our axiological repertoire, and the manner in which we rank them within that repertoire, are a function of the consequences to which their use gives rise. As a pluralist, Berlin is committed to cognitivism, lest his position lapse into relativism. But the "instrumentalism" that I have just ascribed to him suggests that he is not a realist, as that term is usually employed in philosophical debates. That is, he does not believe that the extension of a concept can be determined by just looking at the way things are in the area of value or by mere linguistic conceptual analysis. Indeed, his break with Oxford-style analytic philosophy can be read as having in significant measure to do with its inability to correctly grasp the historically embedded meaning of ethical and political terms.<sup>13</sup>

Berlin believed that not only the understanding, but also the very identification of values, depends upon historical context. Thus, for example, he wrote that "each political philosophy responds to the needs of its own times and is fully intelligible only in terms of all the relevant factors of its age, and intelligible to us only to the degree to which . . . we have experience in common with previous generations."<sup>14</sup>

But Berlin's historicism also has implications to do with what political and moral values are for. Thus, in a letter, he wrote that "[p]olitical

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13. For a fascinating study of Berlin's early philosophical confrontations with logical positivists and their impact on his later work in political thought, see Jamie Reed, *From Logical Positivism to 'Metaphysical Rationalism': Isaiah Berlin on the 'Fallacy of Reduction,'* 29 HIST. POL. THOUGHT 109 (2008).

14. Joshua L. Cherniss, *Introduction to ISAIAH BERLIN, POLITICAL IDEAS IN THE ROMANTIC AGE*, at xxiv (Henry Hardy ed., 2006).

words and notions and acts . . . are not intelligible save in the context of the issues that divide the men who use them.”<sup>15</sup> And in the long “Introduction”—in fact a response to critics—to *Four Essays on Liberty*, he wrote that “[t]here are many values which men have disputed, and for and against which they have fought, that are not mentioned in some earlier phase of history, either because they are assumed without question, or because men are, whatever the cause, in no condition to conceive of them.”<sup>16</sup>

These passages suggest that the embeddedness of concepts to historical context is akin to the connection of tools to a task. Concepts emerge that allow people to make sense of the problems that they face, and that allows them to address the conflicts and debates that emerge through the natural evolution of their common lives. Values in Berlin’s view do not emerge unless they are necessitated by some feature of the epoch in which people lead their lives, and by debates, disagreements, and crises that emerge within those epochs.

This historical instrumentalism has an implication for the kind of cognitivism that best characterizes Berlin’s theory. Value terms are assessed not on the basis of their matching up with some preexisting moral reality. Rather, their assessment depends upon their appropriateness to the practical tasks to which they are to be put. People can be wrong in the conceptualizations that they provide of the predicaments in which they find themselves, just as a person setting out to do any job can be mistaken in the assessment of the best tools with which to do the job in question. In the very important essay entitled *Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century*—included in the same volume as the one in which *Two Concepts* was reprinted, but unjustly overshadowed by its more famous companion—Berlin chronicles the philosophical errors that in his view have come to dominate the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Comparing the Enlightenment period with the “new outlook” that had become dominant in his day, Berlin writes that whereas in the context of the former, “there was at least one premis[e] common to all the disputants, namely, the belief that the problems were real, that it took men of exceptional training and intelligence to formulate them.”<sup>18</sup> He also writes that the modern world is marked by an irrationalist worldview according to which “unconscious and irrational influences outweigh the forces of reason,”<sup>19</sup> and by what might be termed a postrational view according to

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15. *Id.* at xxiii.

16. BERLIN, *FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY*, *supra* note 1, at xlii.

17. ISAIAH BERLIN, *Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century*, in *FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY*, *supra* note 1, at 1.

18. *Id.* at 6–7.

19. *Id.* at 7.

which “answers to problems exist not in rational solutions, but in the removal of the problems themselves by means other than thought and argument.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, for Berlin, political concepts are intelligible relative to context, and specifically to the problems and debates that emerge in particular contexts. The problems that societies have to face are real, and the conceptual resources used by those who aim to interpret and address them can be assessed as better and worse depending on how well they allow them to come to grips with the problems in question. Mistakes can be made both by those who—as has in Berlin’s view been the wont of twentieth-century political thinkers and actors—presume to solve political problems without articulating them *as* problems amenable to rational discussion and resolution and by those who articulate them *poorly*. Thus Berlin’s view that “exceptional training and intelligence” is required to formulate political problems adequately—choosing the right terms in which to make sense of problems requires epistemic skills that are not in Berlin’s view evenly distributed among people.

Reverting to the four kinds of positions described above on which value pluralists must take a stand, we can see that Berlin is a pluralist, and thus a cognitivist, who gives an original answer to the question of the kinds of things that value terms are. Nothing that has been said thus far tells us which position Berlin would take on the third and fourth questions to do with the identification of the values that there are and the methodology that we should employ to discover them.

My suggestion is that the passage from *Two Concepts* with which I began provides us with a methodological principle that in Berlin’s view should guide political thinkers and actors in the delineation of the concepts that they employ to formulate political problems. Call this the principle of “methodological parsimony.” According to this principle, descriptions of political problems achieve greater adequacy to the degree that they allow us to distinguish all of the normative considerations that are at stake in the resolution of these problems. In other words, we can be mistaken in two opposite ways in describing the ethical problems that arise in the course of social interaction and of the operation of political institutions. First, we can err on the side of prolixity by cutting normative considerations too finely, ending up with “distinctions without differences,” to employ a modern phrase. Or we can define our terms too encompassingly,

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20. *Id.*

making it the case that normative considerations that ought to be considered separately are bundled together. Slightly more formally, we can define the requirement laid down by the principle of methodological parsimony (MP) in the following manner:

MP: *In describing a human situation of choice, all, and only, normatively relevant considerations must be identified.*

How does this principle tell in favour of a negative conception of liberty? Imagine that there are two candidate conceptualizations of freedom that might be used for the description of the same situation that an agent *A* encounters. Call them *F1* and *F2*. Imagine that the two following statements describing the situation in question can be constructed on the basis of these two conceptualizations:

- 1) *A* is *F1*.
- 2) *A* is *F2* and *X* and *Y*.

If *F2*, *X*, and *Y* succeed in identifying independent normative considerations that all illuminate *A*'s situation, then *F2* is a better conceptualization of freedom than *F1* is. However, if one of *F2*, *X*, and *Y* fails to pick out a consideration of independent moral importance, then *F1* is a superior conceptualization of freedom than is *F2*.

What methodological parsimony tells us is that when determining what the extension of a normative concept is to be, we must be parsimonious, that is, we must select the extensions that allow us to identify as many normative considerations as possible, whilst avoiding the identification of irrelevant considerations.

The suggestion is that negative liberty, defined by Berlin as “the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity,”<sup>21</sup> is the conception of liberty that best satisfies methodological parsimony. It allows us to focus on the “nuclear, central, minimal meaning which is common to all the many senses of this word, and which signifies *absence of restraint*; more specifically, absence of coercion on the part of specified or unspecified fellow human beings.”<sup>22</sup>

How might one challenge this claim? Two leading and highly influential criticisms can be framed as applying methodological parsimony against Berlin himself, specifically by suggesting that mere noninterference, if it is not supplemented by other normative considerations, is trivial, and

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21. BERLIN, *supra* note 1, at 122.

22. ISAIAH BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Freedom: Romantic and Liberal*, in *POLITICAL IDEAS IN THE ROMANTIC AGE*, *supra* note 14, at 155, 155.



thus breaches the requirement that *only* normatively significant considerations be employed in the description of human predicaments.<sup>23</sup>

This approach has famously been developed in different ways by Charles Taylor<sup>24</sup> and more recently by Philip Pettit.<sup>25</sup> Taylor complains that Berlin's conception of freedom would have us count Enver Hoxha's Tirana as freer than contemporary London because of the greater number of traffic lights in the latter.<sup>26</sup> And Pettit has argued that Berlin might have us count a slave as free, if it turned out that his master was disinclined to impose too many obstacles upon him.<sup>27</sup> Taylor, who has been followed in this critique by perfectionist liberals such as Joseph Raz,<sup>28</sup> argues that liberty is of no normative significance if it is not the liberty to exercise meaningful options.<sup>29</sup> A purely quantitative or "spatial" conception of freedom that eschewed normative considerations would in his view be deficient as an understanding of freedom, for it would not tell us why we care about freedom at all.<sup>30</sup> And Pettit has famously argued for a conception of freedom as "non-domination," and has argued that a certain resilience must attach to freedom for it to count *as* freedom: it matters not only that I am free, but that I am immune from—even the unexercised—ability to interfere arbitrarily with my will.<sup>31</sup>

An argument like Taylor's could in Berlin's defense be defeated by questioning its empirical premise: though there may very well be more traffic lights in London than there are in Tirana, I imagine that the constant threat of violence that is characteristic of a totalitarian state like

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23. One could imagine methodological parsimony being applied to Berlin in the opposite way, that is, by suggesting that negative liberty as he construes it is too broad. For example, one might claim that the concept of negative liberty is too broad because it does not distinguish between human obstacles that result from intentional interference and human obstacles that result from accidental interference. An objection posed in these terms would have to show that it is normatively important to distinguish between these two kinds of obstacle, that is, that we would decide how to act in different ways depending on how we characterized the obstacle.

24. CHARLES TAYLOR, *What's Wrong with Negative Liberty*, in 2 PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS: PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES 211 (1985).

25. PHILIP PETTIT, *REPUBLICANISM: A THEORY OF FREEDOM AND GOVERNMENT* (1997).

26. TAYLOR, *supra* note 24, at 217–19.

27. PETTIT, *supra* note 25, at 22–23.

28. See JOSEPH RAZ, *THE MORALITY OF FREEDOM* (1986).

29. TAYLOR, *supra* note 24, at 217–19.

30. *Id.*

31. PETTIT, *supra* note 25, at 21–27.

Hoxha's Albania actually produced a not inconsiderable amount of unfreedom, negatively construed, numbers of traffic lights notwithstanding.<sup>32</sup>

But a deeper response would be to point out that Taylor denies something that Berlin affirms, namely, that judgments about the *freedom* of an individual or of a group need not be an all-things-considered-normative judgment. That is, even if it turned out to be the case that Albanians under Hoxha were subject to fewer human obstacles than inhabitants of London, this would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that their overall situation was better than that of Londoners. They were poorer, lived in constant fear, were deprived of the kinds of cultural opportunities that Londoners take for granted, and so on. To say that they were freer—operating on the basis of Taylor's questionable empirical assumption—does not in Berlin's view constitute a final judgment about their normative situation. It merely focuses attention on one aspect of that situation, insisting that a perspicuous description of their situation not end up lumping separate normative considerations together.

But is the judgment that Albanians are freer even a *prima facie* normative judgment? Is there *anything* to be said for liberty in the absence of, say, economic opportunity, liberal democratic government, cultural institutions, and the like? To answer these questions, consider two distinct situations. Albania is much as Taylor describes it: backward and benighted in all of the ways that Taylor describes, but with a population that can go about its daily business without too much interference. Schmalbania is as Albania, but with the difference that its population does not have the admittedly impoverished liberty that Albanians have. Most people would, I presume, rather avoid the fate both of Albanians and of Schmalbanians, but if forced to choose, would probably opt for the fate of the former. This suggests that bare Berlinian liberty does denote a distinctive normative consideration, though perhaps a more modest one than many suppose freedom to be, and thus suggests that it does not breach the principle of methodological parsimony.

These considerations apply to Pettit's criticism as well. As is by now well-known, Pettit argues that *negative* freedom is incompletely defined if we omit from it what might be termed robustness conditions. According to Pettit, I am unfree not only if someone interferes with me, but also if someone has the *power* to interfere with me, whether he uses the power or not. What is more, I am not unfree when this power is employed nonarbitrarily.

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32. For the relationship of fear to freedom, see Robert E. Goodin & Frank Jackson, *Freedom from Fear*, 35 PHIL. & PUB. AFF. 249 (2007).

I leave aside for present purposes the question of whether or not Berlin's account can capture without modification the kinds of "virtual" obstacles to freedom that concern Pettit. Matthew Kramer has in this context argued, in my view convincingly, that it is in fact an obstacle to my negative liberty that someone have even the unexercised power to interfere with me arbitrarily, as I am likely to tailor my behavior to avoid this interference.<sup>33</sup> Let us assume that there is a qualitative and not merely a quantitative distinction between being subject of interference and being subject to the *ability* to interfere. Is it not preferable to be able to distinguish these distinct normatively relevant facts through two distinct concepts? Do we not lose normative perspicuity by insisting that there is one and only one concept in play? I believe that we do, and that we lose the ability to recognize what is intuitively plausible, namely, that it is preferable to be at liberty and dominated than it is to be both dominated and interfered with. This recognition does not amount to the claim that the former situation is morally attractive, all things considered, but merely that it is normatively superior to a situation in which one is subject to a master who is also inclined to use his power uninhibitedly.

The gain in normative articulacy that a pared-down, negative conception of liberty such as Berlin's affords us can also be appreciated by considering Pettit's view that nonarbitrary interferences, such as democratically decided upon laws, do not detract from one's freedom at all. Consider two worlds. In the first world, constraint and coercion through law are required in order to achieve a good—say traffic safety—or distributive equity. It is, in other words, much like ours. In the second, these goods are delivered without requiring coercion and constraint, either because agents have fully internalized the other regarding concerns that the law embodies, or implausibly, because they have no desires that detract from the achievement of the sought after good. Pettit's view of freedom gives us no way in which to distinguish these two worlds, the one in which the goods require constraint, and the other in which they do not. And yet they are different from a normative standpoint. Surely a world in which the selfsame goods can be delivered without any coercion is superior to one in which coercion is an

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33. Matthew H. Kramer, *Liberty and Domination*, in *REPUBLICANISM AND POLITICAL THEORY* 31 (Cécile Laborde & John Maynor eds., 2008). Kramer's views are expounded more fully in MATTHEW H. KRAMER, *THE QUALITY OF FREEDOM* (2003).

empirically necessary condition for the realization of these goods. Again, it seems to me that the loss in articulacy counts against a more encompassing conception of freedom such as Pettit's.

Taylor and Pettit succumb to the understandable resistance that we can all feel to the idea that a judgment concerning someone's freedom is not an all-things-considered judgment. But one can both be free and yet afflicted by a number of other normatively significant conditions. Berlinian methodological parsimony prevents us from succumbing to this temptation and thus increases our normative articulacy.

### III. INDEPENDENT JUSTIFICATIONS FOR METHODOLOGICAL PARSIMONY

I have thus far claimed that there is an argument to be recovered from Berlin's *Two Concepts* to the effect that our descriptions of the normative predicaments of human agents must be governed by the methodological assumption that they face more rather than fewer normative considerations in their decisions. My claim was that methodological parsimony best makes sense of the conjunction of Berlin's particular form of cognitivism, his value pluralism, and his eschewal of realist construals of value in favour of a kind of historicist instrumentalism.

I would like in this part to provide independent philosophical warrant for this position. Three claims seem to me to be relevant to making the case for it.

The first claim has already been largely suggested in the foregoing part. Methodological parsimony increases our precision and articulacy in describing the situations of practical choice that we confront. All things equal, more precision is better than less, as long as the level of precision does not breach the relevancy requirement contained in methodological parsimony.

Second, and relatedly, methodological parsimony leads to a construal of our situation with regard to practical judgment that facilitates the making of trade-offs and compromises. Now, Berlin is committed to a metaethics that precludes us from reaching for a metric, such as utility, to facilitate such trade-offs. However, methodological parsimony contributes to the rational adjudication of conflicts in as much as it allows us to see trade-offs *as* trade-offs. It may for example be perfectly legitimate to limit the ability of citizens to dispose freely of their income for the sake of narrowing socioeconomic divides in our society. But to claim that such narrowings do not have costs in terms of liberty, and that they in fact enhance our liberty—according to what has seemed to some to be the most attractive construal of liberty, which defines freedom as conditioned by a certain measure of interpersonal equity—merely prevents us from seeing clearly the issues that we must face in modern

societies. In the case of the relationship between the alleviation of poverty and the reduction of socioeconomic inequality on one hand, and the limitation of freedom on the other, such acts of definitional fiat will most likely strike many citizens, whose support for policies of poverty reduction will be required for the success of such policies, as obfuscation.

Consider the definition of *liberty* proposed in a lecture delivered by Ronald Dworkin in which he addresses Berlin's claim that values often conflict in political life. "Your liberty is your freedom to dispose as you wish of property or resources that have been awarded to you under a reasonably fair system of property and other laws, free from interference of others, so long as you violate no one's rights."<sup>34</sup> Whatever else is gained from defining liberty in terms of fairness, it is certainly not our ability to see trade-offs clearly. Indeed, it builds distributional fairness into the very definition of freedom, and thus prevents us from construing fairness and freedom as distinct normative requirements that must at times be balanced off against one another.

Third, and finally, methodological parsimony raises the justificatory bar in a salutary manner before those who would simply replace argument for controversial normative claims by definitional fiat. As we have seen, the words *liberty* and *freedom* are possessed of considerable emotional freight. Many causes that precision would dictate that we describe using terms other than these have in fact been argued for and fought for under the banner of freedom. It is tempting indeed to invest one's favoured cause with the prima facie moral legitimacy and emotional pull that freedom affords. But this does nothing to justify one's position. And, as we have seen, it leads to needless clouding of the terms in which political compromises and trade-offs need to be debated.

Thus, returning to Dworkin's conceptualization of liberty in the passage just quoted, though it may be strategically rational to argue for fairness by making it into a dimension of freedom—then again, it might not, as people who are antecedently ill-disposed to parting with their wages for the sake of equity are not likely to be placated by the suggestion that their freedom is thereby being increased—this does nothing to increase the independent philosophical warrant of Dworkin's

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34. Ronald Dworkin, *Do Values Conflict? A Hedgehog's Approach*, 43 ARIZ. L. REV. 251, 254 (2001).

conception of fairness. I hasten to add that Dworkin has elsewhere provided powerful independent philosophical arguments for his conception of distributive fairness—a fact that just makes it harder to understand why he feels the need to adopt the definitional strategy.

Berlin's conception of negative freedom as it is discovered by the application of methodological parsimony is a homely and modest dimension of human existence. Much else can be said, and usually needs to be said, about human agents whose overall normative conditions we want to ascertain, once we have determined whether they are free or not. Those theorists and activists who want to convince us of the importance of making some other normative consideration central to this evaluation will have to argue for it directly, rather than by trying to piggyback onto a normative consideration from which methodological parsimony dictates that it be distinguished.

I have thus far illustrated the moral and pragmatic reasons we might have for espousing Berlin's methodological principles by making sole reference to the concept of liberty and to authors that have violated Berlin's methodological strictures with respect to liberty. But the problems that arise for moral and political reasoning when we fail to heed these strictures can be felt in other areas of contemporary moral and political philosophy. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, the concept of health has in recent years succumbed to analogous inflationary pressures as those experienced by the concept of liberty. Health has come to encompass all dimensions of human existence formerly captured under the concept of well-being, and the social determinants, the distribution of which are thought to be relevant to the determination of justice in health, have correspondingly grown to encompass just about all objects of social policy. This has led to a loss of articulacy analogous to what we currently experience with respect to the concept of liberty.<sup>35</sup>

There are thus three reasons to adopt Berlin's principle of methodological parsimony. It increases our level of normative articulacy; it facilitates the identification of trade-offs in the absence of a common currency with which to adjudicate them when the need for them arises; and it prevents the inadvertent or deliberate substitution of moral or practical argument on behalf of other normative considerations by definitional fiat.

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35. I have explored these issues at greater length in Daniel M. Weinstock, *How Political Philosophers Should Think of Health*, *J. MED. & PHIL.* (forthcoming 2010).

IV. DISTINGUISHING METHODOLOGICAL PARSIMONY  
FROM VALUE PLURALISM

In this final part, I want to dispel the impression that some readers may be left with that I have not in fact revealed an aspect of Berlin's argument in *Two Concepts* distinct from the argument that I identified with the "second phase" in the critical reception of the essay, linking Berlin's value pluralism to his privileging of negative liberty.

I have already provided one distinction between the two arguments. In the hands of many authors who have implicitly or explicitly been inspired by the final section of *Two Concepts*, value pluralism remains a purely metaethical thesis, claiming that the moral universe is constituted by an irreducible plurality of values. Methodological parsimony provides pluralists with an important ingredient in the method of discovery that they need in order to develop a substantive, first-order normative theory. The application of the method to the succession of situations that we must face as agents and as members of collectivities provides us with a revisable—in the light of new experiences and situations—schedule of values. Thus, methodological parsimony answers a question that is related to but still distinct from the question to which value pluralism provides elements of an answer.

What is more, if we eschew a realist construal of values, then methodological considerations become primary. They aid us in defining the values that are most useful and fecund to us in describing our practical predicaments, rather than being answerable to an independent axiological reality. So Berlinian methodological parsimony differs from value pluralism at least in as much as it supplements the espousal by Berlin of a metaethical theory with a method of discovery, the application of which allows us to articulate a first-order theory of value.

However, the distinct nature of the argument can be appreciated in other ways as well. For example, first-order value pluralisms can fail to satisfy methodological parsimony. That a set of values contains more than one value does not in and of itself guarantee that these values will not be coarse grained. For example, a value pluralist who claims that all practical decisions can ultimately be reduced to conflicts between liberty and equality would, though a pluralist, fall foul of Berlin's methodological strictures. Methodological parsimony implies the search for a first-order value pluralism with the highest possibility of granularity, subject of course to the relevancy condition that is an important ingredient of methodological parsimony.

The distinctive nature of the argument for methodological parsimony can also be appreciated by attending to the very different implications that it carries, relative to the implications that flow from the mere affirmation of value pluralism. What I want to show is that the argument allows us to plug a pair of holes in Berlin's argument for negative liberty, one of them quite well-known, the other underappreciated.

The negative argument that I identified with the first phase of *Two Concepts*' philosophical reception claims that positive liberty, construed as the rational governance of the will, is prone to giving rise to philosophical abuses to a greater degree than negative liberty.

At first glance, this argument can be seen as wanting in virtue of its applying a slippery slope to one conceptualization of liberty and not to the other, whereas in fact, as Berlin himself recognizes in the introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, "belief in negative freedom is compatible with, and (so far as ideas influence conduct) has played its part in, generating great and lasting social evils."<sup>36</sup>

Is this concession fatal to this first line of argument? It need not be. Methodological parsimony provides us with a more precise diagnosis of what goes wrong in the case of positive liberty than does not go wrong in the case of its negative counterpart. Abuse of positive liberty is due to causes internal to it. It makes the satisfaction of certain rational standards a condition for liberty. The tendency that may in certain sets of circumstances cause positive liberty to be embodied in tyrannical political forms is given rise to by following the conflation internal to the conceptualization, rather than by trying to resist it.

However, when negative liberty gives rise to the kinds of inequities that Berlin alludes to in the passage cited above, it is by doing something that methodological parsimony, and the chastened conception of negative liberty that flows from it, clearly warns against. When negative liberty is elevated to the status of supreme value, as is the case in libertarian theories such as Robert Nozick's,<sup>37</sup> it can lead us to undervalue or even to ignore other important values such as solidarity, equity, and the like. But this type of monism is precisely what the argument that I have constructed on the basis of the methodology I have attributed to Berlin precludes.

Thus, we are in a position to strengthen the first line of argument to have emerged from *Two Concepts* by clearly distinguishing the slippery slopes that confront the two rival conceptions of liberty. If Berlin is right about positive liberty, then the adverse consequences that its application can give rise to are, as it were, written into the concept itself.

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36. BERLIN, *FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY*, *supra* note 1, at xlv.

37. See ROBERT NOZICK, *ANARCHY, STATE, AND UTOPIA* (1974).



The slippery slope toward inequality and injustice that the hypostatization of negative liberty can give rise to is for its part not necessitated by the concept of negative liberty. Quite to the contrary, the limited extension of the concept is in part generated by a more capacious overall theory of value, capable of including other values alongside that of negative liberty. Negative liberty makes most sense as an independent normative consideration when it is part of a set of values including values other than that of liberty. There is therefore something perverse, from the point of view of such a theory, to focus as the libertarian argument does, on negative liberty as the exclusive focus of normative attention. We can thus appreciate that Berlin is not simply evincing an ideologically motivated preference for negative liberty in placing particular emphasis on the slippery slope to which positive liberty can give rise. An emphasis on methodological parsimony can indeed explain both why positive liberty is likely to give rise to deleterious political consequences, and why negative liberty is less likely to do so.

The argument from methodological parsimony also allows us to attend to a flaw in the argument for negative liberty from value pluralism that has been made central in what I have called the second phase in the critical reception of *Two Concepts*. Let me explain. Much ink has been spilt in trying to determine whether a privileging of liberty is compatible with value pluralism. John Gray and, in some moods, Bill Galston<sup>38</sup> have both argued that a thoroughgoing pluralism does not provide liberals with the theoretical purchase they require to give liberty pride of place. A thoroughgoing pluralism would in their view make liberty just one value among others. Any priority that liberals might be inclined to ascribe to liberty would in their view constitute a denial of pluralism, rather than an implication of it.

Liberals have been concerned with shoring up the steps in the argument linking value pluralism and liberty.<sup>39</sup> They have however not been sufficiently attentive to the need to construct an argument to establish that the *conception* of liberty that value pluralism underwrites is of the negative variety. And indeed, there are strong *prima facie*

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38. William A. Galston, *Two Concepts of Liberalism*, 105 *ETHICS* 516 (1995).

39. I have, in a Berlinian mood, contributed to this liberal exercise of reconciliation of freedom and pluralism in a number of places, including Weinstock, *supra* note 4, and more recently, Daniel M. Weinstock, *Value Pluralism, Autonomy, and Toleration*, in *MORAL UNIVERSALISM AND PLURALISM: NOMOS XLIX*, at 125 (Henry S. Richardson & Melissa S. Williams eds., 2009).

grounds to think that the opposite is in fact the case, and that there is an affinity between pluralism and *positive liberty*. For consider: pluralists are at pains to distinguish pluralism from relativism. Pluralism is a form of cognitivism about values, and so it is possible to be *wrong* about the values one proposes to pursue. If this is the case, negative liberty—the ability to pursue whichever value one wants unconstrained—does not ensure against the pursuit of sham values. An argument from value pluralism rather than relativism would seem to point toward the need for a degree of positive liberty. Indeed, some degree of rational self-direction is required in order to ensure that one's actions will be in pursuit of real rather than illusory values. Thus, it would seem that value pluralism does not clearly establish the case for negative liberty as against positive liberty. Liberals have thus far been at pains to show that there is a link between pluralism and liberty, but they have paid insufficient attention to the question of the kind of liberty that pluralism underwrites.

Methodological parsimony can contribute to establishing the importance of negative liberty by showing, first, that positive liberty bundles together normative considerations that are for reasons of increased articulacy best kept separate. Rational self-government—the ability to scrutinize one's wants and desires according to some rationally defensible theory of the kinds of values that there are—is, to be sure, an important normative consideration. It is better that one subject one's choices to some kind of rational scrutiny rather than acting solely on the basis of the relative conative weight of contending desires. But Berlinian methodological parsimony warns against the conflation of rational self-government and of freedom. It is one thing to want to do worthwhile things and not to want to do worthless ones. It is another to be able to do what one wants to do. Ideally, one will want both of these conditions to be satisfied: it is a better situation in which I am free to do the worthwhile things that I want to do, than one in which I am free but not rationally self-governed or one in which I am rationally self-governed but not free. The exact balance that should ideally be struck between the two normative considerations is a subject of intense debate between liberal perfectionists such as Joseph Raz and antiperfectionists such as John Rawls. But it is common ground among all theorists that the balance between these two normative considerations needs to *be* a balance, in other words, that pluralism is best seen as grounding an argument for the unimpeded freedom to choose among worthwhile alternatives, rather than for the elimination of the individual's margin of personal discretion. In other words, the premise of value pluralism grounds an argument according to which some degree of negative liberty

is a nonnegotiable dimension of any normatively acceptable human set of circumstances.

Thus, methodological pluralism comes to the rescue of the argument from pluralism to negative liberty by excluding positive liberty *as* a conception of liberty, and by suggesting that the ideal normative posture of agents in the face of pluralism will be one that attempts to establish a balance between the two distinct normative considerations that positive conceptions of freedom misleadingly lump together.

## V. CONCLUSION

I have in this paper attempted to do three things. First, I have shown that the best way to make sense of a number of philosophical commitments held by Berlin throughout his writings is to ascribe to him not only the affirmation at the metaethical level of value pluralism, but also the belief at the methodological level in a principle of methodological parsimony. I have also endeavoured to show that two prominent critiques of Berlinian negative liberty can be framed in the terms provided by the principle of methodological parsimony, but that Berlin's construal of liberty possesses the resources to withstand the challenge.

Second, I have shown that there are independent philosophical arguments for the principle of methodological parsimony. It increases our level of philosophical articulacy, thereby putting us in a strong position from which to engage in the politics of trade-off and compromise that is a central part of democratic decisionmaking in the context of value pluralism. It also forces theorists and politicians to argue for their preferred positions directly, rather than smuggling them in as components of normative considerations, such as freedom or health, possessed of considerable motivational efficacy.

Finally, I have suggested that the principle of methodological parsimony allows us to plug holes that have plagued both the first and second periods in the critical reception of *Two Concepts*.

This essay leaves many questions unanswered. Crucially, it defers for another occasion the question of how to assess and compare schedules of values that methodological parsimony does not allow us to distinguish. Methodological parsimony allows us to say something about the greater articulacy afforded to us by sets of values that are more or less encompassing. It tells us nothing about the comparisons of sets of values that are simply not comparable in this manner. The possibility of

radically incommensurable ways of dividing up axiological space suggests that methodological parsimony is not the only methodological principle that will have to be at work in a fully adequate method of moral discovery.

Still, I hope enough has been said in this essay to suggest that it will be part of any such adequate methodology, and that Isaiah Berlin can fairly be credited with having seen and appreciated its importance.