

SCHOLARLY EXCHANGE

WHY WE NEED POSITIVE LIBERTY

Gina Gustavsson argues that Isaiah Berlin's case against positive liberty in "Two Concepts of Liberty" is best explained and justified by a psychological connection that has hitherto been neglected in the critical literature.¹ Criticisms of Berlin's view as logically flawed are beside the point, and attempts to justify it by reference to historical context (the Cold War) tend to undermine its current relevance. Rather, Berlin is best understood as pointing to an underlying pattern of human psychology according to which positive conceptions of liberty—that is, liberty as self-mastery by contrast with the "negative" liberty of noninterference—tend in fact (although not in logic) to draw people towards authoritarian political conclusions. Gustavsson illustrates this process by reference to the French ban, in 2010, on the wearing of full-face Muslim veils in public. The ban on veils is an example, she argues, of the very problem that Berlin warns us of in positive liberty, the presentation of coercion as liberation.

Gustavsson's position, although stimulating throughout, should also be questioned in some of its key aspects. Most fundamentally, it invites us to return to a critique of positive liberty according to which all versions are equally impugned, thus abandoning the more recent tendency to accept that Berlin's warning applies more convincingly to some versions rather than to others. The latter, more nuanced picture remains preferable. Berlin is right to suspect certain kinds of positive liberty as potentially complicit with tyranny. But a blanket condemnation of positive liberty is also a mistake, since in at least one version, personal autonomy, the psychological danger described by Gustavsson is absent. Indeed, positive liberty understood as personal autonomy makes an important contribution to the ideals and norms of liberal democracy, and this can be illustrated from the debate on Muslim veils.

¹Gina Gustavsson, "The Psychological Dangers of Positive Liberty: Reconstructing a Neglected Undercurrent in Isaiah Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty,'" *Review of Politics* 76, no. 2 (2014): 267–91. Subsequent references to this article are given in-text.

Two Kinds of Positive Liberty, Two Psychologies

First let me review some familiar background in order to identify Gustavsson's contribution more precisely. In "Two Concepts" Berlin draws connections between the idea of positive liberty and political authoritarianism, and recommends negative liberty as the safer option politically.

According to his argument, the positive idea involves the notion of self-mastery, which at its broadest involves a more authentic part of the personality controlling the rest. In what might be called the classic account, a "real" or "higher" self, typically identified with reason, controls the lower self, usually associated with the desires or appetites. Berlin's warning is that this lets in the possibility that the real self might be defined by authorities external to the person in a way that conflicts with her actual wishes. The state or Party, for example, might then declare that by coercing the individual it is actually liberating her because ensuring that her real self (as the authority defines it) is in control. Coercion is then passed off as liberty—the inversion of liberty or "monstrous impersonation" complained of by Berlin.²

Berlin's position has often been criticized on the ground that it applies more convincingly to some forms of positive liberty or self-mastery than to others. Many readers would accept that in the case of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx, for example, Berlin is correct, identifying conceptions of freedom that can be easily manipulated by political tyrants. Rousseau, for instance, equates the subject of positive freedom with the true self, which is in turn identified with the "general will" of the political community, an idea that in the hands of unscrupulous or fanatical leaders can be turned against the individual.

However, several critics have argued that other forms of positive liberty are not so susceptible to Berlin's thesis.³ Mill's "individuality," for example, identifies the subject of freedom with critical reflection that must stem from the individual herself.⁴ Similarly, John Christman argues that self-mastery need not be conceived as the realization of a real self that is "metaphysically set apart" from the empirical self, and that may therefore be better understood by authorities external to the individual.⁵ Rather, self-mastery may take the form of "personal autonomy," which involves a process of critical reflection

²Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180. According to Gustavsson, the theme of the inversion of liberty "tends to be overlooked" in the critical literature (272), but this is not true. The inversion theme is an absolutely routine part of any competent account of "Two Concepts." See, e.g., the references in Gustavsson's own note 19.

³See the references given by Gustavsson, n28.

⁴John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), chap. 3.

⁵John Christman, "Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 345.

that is open-ended and strictly internal to the person. The process is open-ended in that there is no uniquely correct real self; rather, the agent's real self is whatever identity is authenticated by her own critical process. On this model there is no possibility of an external authority's knowing what is authentic to the person better than the person herself. Further, there is no possibility of the person's being forced to be free, since freedom on this view can be achieved only through the agent's own self-reflection. Hence, there is a conceptual gap between this more individualistic form of positive liberty and the political authoritarianism that worries Berlin. By apparently tarring all positive liberty with the authoritarian brush, Berlin was overstating his case. Not all positive liberty has the tyrannical potential that concerns him.

Gustavsson's most original contribution is to argue that such conceptual distinctions are correct but irrelevant as a criticism of Berlin. Berlin's aim is to link positive liberty with authoritarianism not by logic but by making "an empirical, more specifically a psychological, connection: to warn against a movement from positive liberty that is likely to take place through certain mental mechanisms" (275). Authoritarian conclusions do not follow logically from positive conceptions of liberty, but they are suggested by a *de facto* psychological process.

This seems to imply that Berlin was right after all: the inversion of freedom is aroused or stimulated by *any* form of positive liberty. Gustavsson begins by noting and endorsing Berlin's opening admission that positive liberty is "among the deepest interests of mankind" (quoted by Gustavsson, 271). But it soon turns out, for Gustavsson as for Berlin, that even the seemingly innocuous and the most liberal versions tempt people to authoritarian conclusions, specifically to the inversion of liberty. Although Gustavsson does not spell this out, it appears to follow from her view that attempts to discriminate among types of positive liberty in this connection are in vain. The same thought is reinforced by her repeated claims of the universality of the psychological process she describes—as, for example, a function of "the human mind" (276) or "human psychology" (290), and a tendency that is "beyond history" (280). The general idea appears to be that it does not matter what kind of positive liberty we are dealing with, it is a law of human nature that positive liberty, of whatever kind, has this psychological effect on people.

The problem with Gustavsson's argument is that the conceptual distinctions she dismisses as irrelevant remain highly relevant. It still matters what kind of positive liberty we are talking about, because the psychological pattern she points to is more probable in the case of some kinds of positive liberty than others. Indeed, the same distinction remains central as that outlined above. If we conceive of positive liberty in the individualist sense, as personal autonomy, then a person is positively free only if she forms her desires and goals through her own internal and open-ended process of critical reflection. How would a person be tempted to accept coercion as the liberation of her real self when her real self is just what *she* makes of it? External authorities can say what they like; the autonomous person has the last word.

It is true that when Berlin explains the slide from the idea of the real self to the inversion of freedom he is explicit that this does not occur by logical steps but rather by something more like loose associations.⁶ But logic still helps us identify what species of positive liberty we are talking about, and we need to know this before proceeding. From the broad notion of self-mastery it does not follow that we must be committed to the idea of a single, objective real self as in Rousseau; we might consistently accept the idea of the autonomous self-in-process as in Christman. This logical point generates two distinct conceptions of positive liberty. It is surely relevant to bear this distinction in mind when we are assessing Berlin's thesis that "positive liberty" is vulnerable to the inversion problem. That basic point is not undermined just by saying that the vulnerability in question is psychological. The individualist form of positive liberty suggests a quite different psychology from that of the authoritarian form.

In Search of the Self-Righteous Monist

Gustavsson may reply that it is not positive liberty alone that has the relevant psychological effect in her view, but rather a combination of positive liberty and "self-righteous monism" (277). Moral monism is the idea, identified by Berlin as endemic in Western thought, that every ethical question has a single correct answer, and that ultimately all such answers indicate a single, uniquely correct form of life. The self-righteous monist is one who believes that her "own ordering of values must be the only rational one" (277). Self-righteous monists are easily tempted, psychologically, to see the imposition of their views on others as a right, and perhaps a duty. When positive liberty is added to self-righteous monism, the imposition of putative moral truth comes to be equated with liberation. Moreover, Gustavsson argues, Berlin is correct that self-righteous monism is, empirically, "a general human tendency" (279). It follows that to dangle the notion of positive liberty in front of people is to ask for trouble. However the logicians might divide it up, its psychological threat, the invitation to call coercion liberation, remains potent.

However, this reply does not affect my point that it matters which kind of positive liberty we are talking about. It is still only the authoritarian species of positive liberty that is the danger here; self-righteous monists will not be interested in personal autonomy. Moreover, the reply shows that what really does the work in Gustavsson's argument is not the idea of positive liberty but the idea of self-righteous monism. Gustavsson herself concedes that positive liberty without monism is "not enough" for the process she describes; a positive libertarian could be a pluralist, and a pluralist will call coercion by its own name (278). Gustavsson begins by endorsing Berlin's attack on positive

⁶Berlin, *Liberty*, 179–80.

liberty, but it turns out that the attack succeeds only with that kind of positive liberty that depends on self-righteous monism.

I think that Gustavsson is broadly right about the danger of the self-righteous monist, but also that her view should be qualified. For a start, Berlin's work does not support the claim that most people are self-righteous monists. Strictly speaking, he says only that monism, not specifically self-righteous monism, is the dominant view, and it is not clear that he attributes this to people at large. He refers to monism as a "*philosophia perennis*," which suggests a philosophical rather than a popular belief.⁷ Further, Gustavsson concedes that empirical research does not establish the ubiquity of monism, let alone of self-righteous monism (279). She says that research does show that people tend to regard their own views as rational and differing beliefs as irrational. But there is significant distance between that kind of view and monism, a further gap between monism and the more militant self-righteousness that endorses the imposition of one's beliefs on others, and still further to travel before we arrive at the relatively sophisticated notion that the imposition of one's beliefs on others amounts to their liberation.

The distances in question are not only logical but also psychological. Gustavsson more than once describes the monist as "not entirely unlikely" to wish to impose ideals on others (277, 280). That does not seem all that likely. As David Cannadine argues, the historical record shows that, although rival elites have regularly fallen into violent dispute over matters of religious belief, for example, ordinary people have generally preferred to coexist peacefully where possible, despite their religious differences.⁸ Monism may be widespread, but degrees of self-righteousness seem to be much more variable.

It seems to me that it is not the assumed monism of the majority that we should fear most, but the heightened self-righteousness of the few. It is true, however, that it takes only a minority of influential self-righteous monists who are willing to take things further to set in motion a more general slide from routine dogma to coercion and then to the rebadging of coercion as liberation. Ordinary people, who might otherwise have left others in peace, have often been swept up by those relatively few fanatics whose self-righteousness is more extreme. This is why I say that Gustavsson's theme of self-righteous monism needs qualification rather than outright rejection. Although most people are not themselves self-righteous in the relevant sense, the self-righteousness of the few can be crucial. This is what Berlin warns us about, I believe.

⁷Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 8; Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 6.

⁸David Cannadine, *The Undivided Past: History beyond Our Differences* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 44–47.

Once again, however, this process connects with positive liberty only in its more authoritarian versions. To the extent that self-righteous monists have any interest in positive liberty, they are likely to be attracted to versions that promise the liberation of a single true self in contrast with the open-ended versions associated with personal autonomy. The real problem, again, is not positive liberty as such but self-righteous monism. This fits with Berlin's acknowledgment, endorsed by Gustavsson, that positive liberty is an abiding human value; it is only the abuse of the positive idea that we need to guard against, not the idea itself. To say this is not to "dismiss [Berlin's warning] out of hand" (290), but to acknowledge the limits of that warning, both logical and psychological.

Veils and Liberty

We should also consider historical context. The abuse of positive liberty that most concerned Berlin in "Two Concepts" was the exploitation of the idea by apologists for state Communism during the Cold War. But Gustavsson worries that harping on this example has the effect of making Berlin's thesis less relevant to the present. Instead, she proposes as a more contemporary case the French ban on the wearing of full-face Muslim veils (*burqa* and *niqab*) in public. For Gustavsson, this is a strong instance of the way the positive idea can enable tyrannical authorities to dress up coercion as liberation. If freedom is the liberation of the true republican self, then the French authorities may be able to claim that they know the content of that true self better than the individual concerned, and to insist that their coercion liberates that self.

I agree that this is a good example of positive liberty gone astray, and I appreciate the way the example shows how Berlin's insights can be applied beyond the historical context he had in mind. I am less convinced that the case of the French ban indicates "a repressive impulse within liberalism" (286) rather than a repressive impulse within republicanism. Liberals are not committed to the liberation of a republican self.

However, I also suggest that Gustavsson's wholly critical account of what positive liberty can contribute to an understanding of this issue is one-sided. If we acknowledge an individualist form of positive liberty as personal autonomy, we can see how that idea might be employed to oppose rather than uphold the French ban.

First, Gustavsson mentions the popular worry that Muslim women are effectively forced to wear the veil by oppressive conditioning within their families and communities. This is a legitimate concern since this seems to be the situation of at least some Muslim women. Surely we need a way of saying that such women, in this respect, lack freedom. The notion of negative liberty is not helpful, since it is satisfied as long as there is no physical coercion. Rather it is personal autonomy, the positive capacity for choice in accordance

with critical reflection, that captures the kind of liberty restricted by social conditioning. However, to say this is not to accept the French policy or to fall foul of Berlin's warning, because it is not to impose an externally mandated real self on the women concerned. Rather, it asserts that they should have the freedom to determine their own identity, whether that turns out to accept traditional veiling or not.

Second, we need the idea of positive liberty as autonomy to defend veiling when it is genuinely free—or at any rate autonomy adds a further dimension to negative liberty in this context. As Nancy Hirschmann writes, "The hijab can be seen as a tool of women's agency, in that it allows women to negotiate the strictures of patriarchal custom to gain what they want, to assert their independence, and to claim their own identity."⁹ Veiling can sometimes be the result of an unreflective acceptance of cultural custom, but it may also be an expression of personal reflection and commitment, as suggested by the phrase, "claim their own identity."

So, we need the idea of positive liberty, understood as personal autonomy, to capture both kinds of veiling case: the conditioned and the autonomous. In both cases, moreover, the individualist sense of positive liberty gives us a reason to oppose the French policy. Where conduct is autonomous and causes no harm to others, the state has in general no business interfering. Where conduct is conditioned, that may be a cause for concern but people cannot be forced to be autonomous. Perhaps the state does have a role in this latter case, but a simple ban on the French model is not in itself liberating.

The more general point is that positive liberty in the sense I am recommending makes an important contribution to liberal-democratic principles and practice. The positive sense of liberty is needed to express liberal concerns in many areas—for example, freedom from conditioning by advertising, the media, popular prejudice, oppressive cultural custom, and patriarchy. It is a mistake to see negative liberty as *the* liberal freedom and positive liberty as the antiliberal inversion of freedom; matters are not so black and white. Berlin himself, in his later years, came to regret that he had fostered that impression.¹⁰

⁹Nancy Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 191. Hirschmann refers to the hijab (a generic term for modest female dress, usually a headscarf leaving the face exposed) rather than specifically to the full-face veil (burqa or niqab) that is the subject of the French ban, but it seems to me that the same principle applies. Although Hirschmann does not explicitly use the term "positive liberty" in connection with veiling, she does link it to feminist concerns more broadly in "Isaiah Berlin, Feminism, and Positive Liberty," in *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom: "Two Concepts of Liberty" 50 Years Later*, ed. Bruce Baum and Robert Nichols (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰Steven Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation," *Salmagundi* 120 (1998): 93; Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Syngulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 120.

I doubt that Gustavsson would disagree with my general point, and I would be surprised if she had no sympathy with my proposal for ways in which positive liberty may legitimately contribute to discussion of the Muslim veil. But if so, I am uncertain what her central thesis amounts to beyond a repetition of the general (too general) warning already found in Berlin. It is hard to see what is gained by returning to a blanket suspicion of positive liberty that ignores or sidesteps the distinctions developed in the literature of the last twenty years. In particular, the exiling from public discourse of positive liberty as personal autonomy would be a disservice to liberal thought.

However, I want to end more positively because there is much of interest in Gustavsson's article. What I like most is the way she analyzes the various interpretations of Berlin's account of the inversion of liberty into three distinct candidates: logical or conceptual, psychological, and historical. Where I differ from Gustavsson is that I do not see the psychological interpretation as excluding or dominating the others. Rather, it seems to me that Berlin's position is a combination of all three. It is conceptual in that positive liberty is not a simple idea, there are several different versions of it, and we need to be clear which one we are talking about. It is psychological in that *some* versions of positive liberty invite a psychological process in which coercion is rebadged as freedom. And it is historical in that both the conceptualization and the psychology of positive liberty occur within historical contexts that raise different issues at different times.

George Crowder