The Meaning and Value of Freedom: Berlin contra Arendt

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The European Legacy *on 30 September 2014, available online:*

https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2014.965520

Abstract

This essay considers the theoretical disagreement between Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt on the meaning and value of freedom. Berlin thinks that negative liberty as non-interference is commendable because it is attuned to the implication of value pluralism that man is a choice-making creature and cannot be otherwise. By contrast, the political freedom to act is in Arendt's view a more fulfilling ideal because it is only in political action that man's potentiality is actualised, his unique identity manifested and his being-in-the-world-with-others reaffirmed. What lies beneath the two thinkers' dispute over the most satisfactory meaning of freedom, I argue, is a deeper disagreement over human nature itself. The implication of this analysis for the contemporary debate between pluralist liberals and their agonistic critics is briefly discussed in conclusion.

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Introduction

One of the interesting things that the posthumous publication of Isaiah Berlin's letters has revealed is the extent of his aversion to Hannah Arendt. For example, in February 1959, several months after Arendt's now classic *The Human Condition* was published, Berlin told his friend Morton White that the book was "absolutely unreadable" and her argument in the first several chapters "absolutely awful." "Is there something in her after all?" Berlin asked White, only to encourage him to "up and rout her."[1] Berlin's misgivings were not only about her work but also about her personality. He once observed that she suffered from a "terrible lack of heart."[2] True, this particular charge stemmed from Arendt's highly controversial reports on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which "genuinely infuriated" Berlin.[3] But the Eichmann controversy did not *cause* Berlin's hostility. Arendt had "occupied a prominent position on [Berlin's] 'most hated' list" at least since the 1950s—before the Eichmann trial in 1961.[4] By the time *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* appeared as a book, Berlin essentially arrived at his final verdict: Arendt's work was a piece of "metaphysical free association" connecting "inaccurate" premises and "unswallowable" conclusions. This Berlin wrote in May 1963.[5] A quarter-century later, he reiterated his judgement in exactly the same terms, this time in a published interview: Arendt "produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It is all a stream of metaphysical free association."[6]

Berlin's terms of denunciation are strong and his hostility intense.[7] Intellectual factors alone cannot explain the whole of Berlin's attitude to Arendt. Scholars have rightly begun to consider personal and political factors—such as the two theorists' conflicting opinions on Israeli politics and Berlin's (alleged) prejudice against women—that might have aroused his sentiments.[8] While this development is a valuable one, what

can easily go missing in this essentially *historical* interest in the intriguing relationship between the two iconic thinkers of the last century are the important *theoretical* differences between them. In fact, the recent literature has not shed light on arguably the most central of those differences, namely, the two thinkers' disagreement over the meaning and value of freedom. This is an overdue issue. Political theorists have long been aware that Berlin and Arendt advanced strikingly different theories of freedom, most explicitly articulated in their seminal essays "Two Concepts of Liberty" (Berlin) and "What Is Freedom?" (Arendt);[9] but the crux of the two thinkers' disagreement has not been carefully scrutinised.[10] This essay aims to correct this omission. The outcome, as I shall demonstrate, is not only an important addition to our understanding of Berlin's and Arendt's political thought. It also enables us to appreciate the fundamental differences over the question of human nature that lie beneath the two rival ways of thinking about freedom. The essay concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of this renewed understanding for the contemporary debate between those who build on Berlin's liberal project and those who develop Arendt's insights into political participation and agonistic citizenship.

Negative Liberty

In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin divides various conceptions of freedom into two major categories: negative liberty as non-interference and positive liberty as self-mastery. He is ambiguous about the merit of the latter, painstakingly exposing its defective nature in "Two Concepts," while emphasising the concept's "perfect" or "universal" validity elsewhere (39).[11] This ambiguity raises the interpretive issue of whether Berlin saw negative liberty as an insufficient ideal that must be combined with its positive

counterpart. But one thing is clear: self-sufficient or not, negative liberty is in Berlin's view "a truer and more humane ideal" than its positive counterpart (216).

What does Berlin mean by "negative liberty," and why is this a desirable ideal? A person is negatively free in Berlin's sense if he is not prevented by others from doing what he could otherwise do.[12] This is more than feeling free. One feels free if one's desires are not frustrated, but this may be achieved "as effectively by eliminating desires as by satisfying them" (31). For example, a would-be writer who finds it difficult to complete his novel may end his frustration by abandoning his ambitions altogether as well as by getting his work published. Of course, some philosophers, such as the Stoics, have conceptualised freedom along those lines as self-control, seeing the elimination of desires as a genuine path to attaining freedom. A person is free in this view if he masters the art of living to lead a peaceful and pleasant life regardless of the external circumstances in which he finds himself. Berlin firmly rejects this view as false, as amounting to an "unmistakable… form of the doctrine of sour grapes" (186). To be negatively free is to *be* free; it is not to *feel* free.

To be free to do or be X is different from being capable of doing or being X. A person may not be able to fly but this does not mean that he is unfree to fly. A person is said to be unfree if and only if his desires are frustrated as a result of "alterable human practices" (32). Paradigmatically, a person is made unfree by somebody's *deliberate* interference; in this case we say that he is oppressed. But a person may also be made unfree as an *unintended* consequence of "the operation of human agencies" (32).[13] Consider poverty. A person is unfree to obtain, as well as incapable of obtaining, food, water and other basic necessities if his poverty is caused by unjust social arrangements for which some members of the society are knowingly or unknowingly accountable. His

situation is different from a food crisis caused by a natural disaster, in which case the victims are simply incapable of obtaining, but are neither unfree nor free to obtain, basic necessities (169–70).

To be free in the negative sense is to have opportunities. It is different from realising them. Berlin highlights the difference by repeatedly invoking the image of "open doors." A free person has many open doors of various kinds in front of him (177). He may not be walking through a door, or may not have decided which door to walk through, but these do not make him unfree or less free. Moreover, the doors that make him free do not need to lead him to something valuable or desirable. A person may be free in the negative sense to be idle, irrational, stupid or wrong, or even to do evil. The liberty of "slave-owners to dispose of their slaves" or "of the torturer to inflict pain on his victim" may be "wholly undesirable," yet they are still "genuine freedoms" (48).

Negative liberty is also different from "the conditions of its exercise" (45). A sick and starving citizen is unlikely to go to a voting booth until he satisfies his basic needs. But this does not mean that he does not have the freedom to vote. Once he satisfies more basic needs such as shelter and security, he will, if he wishes, exercise the freedom that he *already* has. Berlin's strict separation between freedom and its conditions has been criticised for amounting to "an unfortunate reversion" towards libertarianism, or towards the inflation of the value of liberty at the expense of other considerations.[14] But the charge is unfair because his endorsement of negative liberty is not unconditional; he concedes that negative liberty must be balanced against, and at times compromised by, other values such as equality, justice and solidarity. This means that Berlin's distinction between liberty and its conditions is meant to be principally analytic, rather than social or

political. He scrupulously draws the distinction because he believes that "nothing is gained by a confusion of terms" (172).

Berlin characterises negative liberty variously as the absence of interference, of prevention, of constraint, of oppression, and of obstacles. These terms denote different ideas, and his terminological imprecision generates some points of ambiguity that need to be explicated here. First, in Berlin's view, constrains on negative liberty are always inflicted by somebody *external* to the liberty-holder. A smoker who has been unable to quit smoking, while he knows he must quit because smoking is bad, is not unfree to quit smoking.[15] To think of him as unfree is to endorse the positive concept of liberty. According to this concept, a person is free to the extent that he can exercise control over himself to be in charge of his own destiny. In its standard form it holds that a person consists of a rational self that knows what he should do and an irrational self that cannot do what the rational counterpart knows he ought to do. In the case of the smoker, he is considered unfree to quit smoking in the positive sense because he is prevented internally by his irrational desires from doing what he rationally knows is the right thing to do. The concept of positive liberty sees internal constraints as a genuine obstacle to human liberty. Its negative counterpart does not.

This is not to say that negative liberty may be negated only by physical interference. A person may be made unfree by externally induced *psychological* constrains. Threat is a case in point. A person may be prevented from doing X if he is told by someone that he will be killed if he does X; whether the killing is actually undertaken is irrelevant, so long as the threat is taken to be serious and credible. While the existence of negative liberty "depends ultimately on causal interactions among bodies,"[16] some bodily interactions, for example A's pointing a gun at B's head, can

make B's desired action ineligible and negate B's negative liberty. Unlike Hobbes, Berlin does not think that fear and liberty are "consistent."[17]

The Value of Negative Liberty

What does Berlin have to say to defend his conception of negative liberty? Wherein lies its value? It must firstly be observed that the answer has little to do with liberalism. Contrary to the common misunderstanding, negative liberty is not equivalent to a *liberal* concept of freedom.[18] Of course, Berlin's list of negative liberty theorists includes classical liberals such as J. S. Mill, Constant, and Tocqueville, but it also registers authoritarian Hobbes, and utilitarian Bentham who oscillates between the liberal and authoritarian poles. Berlin's list of positive liberty theorists likewise includes both liberals and non-liberals, Kant and T. H. Green (whom Berlin calls "a genuine liberal") on one side and Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Jacobins and Communists on the other (180).

The most explicit line of argument that Berlin advances in defence of negative liberty in "Two Concepts" has a curiously indirect quality: negative liberty is *less* vulnerable to abuse than its positive counterpart. Positive liberty as self-mastery, as I mentioned earlier, contains within itself the idea of a divided self. This idea, Berlin emphasises, is not inherently authoritarian and can take a liberal, Kantian form; according to this notion, a person is (positively) free to the extent that he acts according to the moral law perceived by the reflexive use of reason. However, the idea of a divided self is still vulnerable to abuse to the extent that it enables the negation of one's express desires to be seen as liberating. Authoritarian leaders can appropriate and have appropriated this reasoning to justify oppression; they claim that they are liberating individuals from

stupidity, irrationality, and so on, as they negate the express desires of the oppressed ("forcing men to be free," as Rousseau famously put it). In this way, Kantian individualism can be and has been transformed into "something close to a pure totalitarian doctrine" (198). Negative liberty is superior to its positive rival at least in so far as it is exempted from the risk of such abuse.

Berlin's attack on positive liberty in "Two Concepts" is extensive, and here his critics are right in detecting a hint of "the 'us' and 'them' logic animating the Cold War."[19] Reading "Two Concepts" alone, one hardly gets the impression that the author was in fact critical of laissez-faire capitalism, had "nothing against socialism," and was a lifelong supporter of the American New Deal (38).[20] There are contextual reasons to explain this disparity between the fairly straightforward defence of negative liberty in "Two Concepts" and the author's more complex view expressed elsewhere. That is, in the 1950s and 1960s when Berlin wrote, revised and published "Two Concepts," he felt the need to highlight the perils of positive liberty because "whereas liberal ultra-individualism could scarcely be said to be a rising force at present, the rhetoric of 'positive' liberty… continues to play its historic role… as a cloak for despotism in the name of a wider freedom" (39). As the abuse of positive liberty was doing more harm than that of its negative counterpart, Berlin reasoned, it was sensible to devote more resources to attack the former.[21]

But Berlin has another, and theoretically more important argument to make in defence of negative liberty. It stems from his flagship idea that the ultimate and objective values that humans choose and live by are many, and that "not all of them are in principle compatible with each other," so that to realise some of the values "must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others" (214). Berlin had not fully developed this value pluralist

thesis when he wrote "Two Concepts," but the essay already makes it clear that the value of negative liberty is grounded in what he takes to be the truth of value pluralism. If pluralism is true and not all values are in principle compatible or commensurable with each other, humans must of necessity choose between authentic values. And since negative liberty (unlike its positive counterpart) places central value on the freedom of the individual to choose for himself what is good for him, it is better attuned to the unavoidability of value conflict and must therefore be considered a "truer and more humane ideal" than positive liberty. Negative liberty, in other words, is superior because it does not impose a preconceived harmony of values on our world to make the crooked timber of humanity unduly—inhumanly—straight.

Consider, finally, Berlin's critique and appropriation of Mill's work to see more in detail Berlin's value pluralist defence of negative liberty.[22] Berlin draws a sharp contrast between the liberal and consequentialist sides of Mill's thought to downgrade the significance of the latter. *Pace* Mill the consequentialist, Berlin argues, the primary reason why liberty is valuable is not that it is instrumental to the development of men and women's individuality, which in turn promotes the diversity of interests and opinions that is supposed to be instrumental to the collective progress of civilised society. Berlin's objection is twofold. First, the consequentialist reasoning is empirically unfounded because individuality can flourish to the highest degree in "severely disciplined communities" as well as in "more tolerant or indifferent societies" (175). This point has in Berlin's view been conclusively demonstrated by the resilience of individual Russian artists under Stalin's rule, such as Anna Akhamatova and Boris Pasternak whom Berlin personally knew.[23] Their freedom of expression was significantly restricted and yet their creative powers remained undiminished. Second, the consequentialist argument is

redundant because what ultimately makes negative liberty intrinsically valuable is the implication of value pluralism for human life: that human beings are destined to choose between ultimate and objective values. This makes the freedom of choice an essential part of what it means to be human. Mill the defender of liberty saw this, Berlin suggests, though Mill the consequentialist failed to see it. This is why Berlin presents his defence of negative liberty as a restatement of Mill's argument in *On Liberty*. The truth that man is a choice-making creature is the *ultimate* foundation of the value of negative liberty.[24] Berlin explicates a striking implication of this view in an interview: to "refrain from choosing… would make you *inhuman*."[25]

Political Freedom

Arendt disagrees. She claims that freedom is more than the absence of interference or constraint and believes that the human capacity for choice is not the ultimate foundation of the value of freedom. What, then, is Arendt's preferred conception, known as "political freedom?" And wherein lies its value? Let me consider these questions in turn before getting, as it were, Berlin's and Arendt's ideas to face each other.

First, a person is politically free in Arendt's sense when he is acting and interacting, and speaking and deliberating with others about matters of public concern in a formally or informally institutionalised public realm. To be free is to exercise an opportunity for political participation. To use Berlin's imagery, a free person in Arendt's sense is not somebody standing in front of numerous attractive open doors, but somebody actually walking through a door *to* politics. Freedom, for her, is "a state of being manifest in action" (163).

To be politically free requires a set of preconditions. One needs to eat, drink, sleep and satisfy basic biological needs prior to participating in politics. Arendt agrees with liberals on this issue: first things come first. Also, according to Arendt, political participation typically assumes the existence of a network of fairly stable and durable institutions, from the constitution and other laws of the land to non-legal customs and practices, regulating political conduct, governing the deliberative process and decision-making procedures, and overseeing the proper implementation of agreed policies.[26] Men and women enter such a network of institutions as citizens. Citizenship makes people equal for political purposes, abstracting away various natural differences that they have as humans, and enabling them to construct public *personae* to appear before and among their fellow citizens. Those who do not have a citizenship—slaves, women and manual labourers in antiquity and refugees and the "stateless" in modern times, among others—are excluded from an established public realm and hence lack an elementary condition for political freedom. Arendt consequently uses the term "liberation" to refer to the lifting of the biological *and* legal barriers to entering the public realm. To be "liberated" is to have a status for political participation. To be free is to make use of that status.[27]

However, the importance of *formal* institutions to Arendt's conception of political freedom should not be overstated. Echoing the wisdom of mid-twentieth-century political science, she repeatedly argues that formal institutions are defective unless they are supported by a matching *political culture*.[28] It is this idea that Arendt underlines when she quotes John Adams: "a constitution is a standard, a pillar, and a bond when it is understood, approved and beloved. But without this intelligence and attachment, it might as well be a kite or balloon, flying in the air."[29] Moreover, Arendt is fascinated by the spontaneous emergence of informal and temporary public realms in times of crises,

revolts and revolutions. The paradigmatic case of such extraordinary politics is the American Revolution, in which the spontaneous action-in-concert of the revolutionary leaders ("Founding Fathers") resulted in a tangible document—the U.S. Constitution—to serve as the foundation of a free republic. While political freedom is significantly promoted by formal institutions, it is not guaranteed by them and can sometimes manifest itself without them.

What ultimately enables political freedom, then, is the "in-between" that simultaneously "relates and separates" people.[30] More specifically, it is the *politicised* "in-between" where men and women gather together, show the courage to publicly speak and act, express willingness to hear what others have to say and see what others have to do, and form and exchange opinions about others' words and deeds. Arendt repeatedly claims that humans have built-in potentiality to participate in politics in this way, and calls that potentiality "human plurality." This, in Arendt's words, is "specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life."[31]

Arendt's political freedom, though it is sometimes described as "civic republican,"[32] is different from the conceptions of republican liberty recently advanced by Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit and others. True, Arendt and contemporary republicans can meaningfully be contrasted to liberals to the extent that they see essential connections between political participation and individual freedom. But they differ in two crucial respects. First, unlike Arendt, contemporary republicans see political participation essentially in instrumental terms.[33] While they consider citizens' participation necessary to securing individual liberty, the substance of the liberty that they aim to secure "scarcely differs at all" from what negative liberty theorists want to defend.[34] By contrast,

as I shall elaborate in a moment, Arendt sees intrinsic, as well as instrumental, worth in political participation. Consequently, her dispute with negative liberty theorists is more substantive than contemporary republicans' quarrel with negative liberty theorists: it involves the content of freedom as well as the means to securing it.

Second, Arendt and contemporary republicans disagree on who should or would participate in politics and for what reason. The latter generally think that *all* citizens should serve the republic if they wish to secure individual liberty; a failure to do so would provide room for the rise of arbitrary power. Arendt, by contrast, suggests that the self-chosen *few* would voluntarily participate in politics because they "have a taste for public freedom and cannot be 'happy' without it."[35] She believes that everyone should have an opportunity to be a political actor, though she is aware that some people will choose not to make use of that opportunity. The exclusion from the public realm should always be a self-exclusion.

It may be said that contemporary republicans make a negative-incentive argument (to avoid domination), and Arendt a positive-incentive argument (to pursue the intrinsically valuable and rewarding aspect of public life), for political participation. This makes Arendt's proposal more "utopian" in one respect, in that it assumes that political participation can make people "happy" in some special way that nothing else can do. But Arendt's proposal is less "utopian" in another respect, in that she does not, unlike Machiavelli and his present-day disciples, demand unwilling citizens to perform public duties.[36] In Arendt's view, "the task of good government" is no more than "to assure [the self-chosen few] of their rightful place in the public realm."[37]

This means that Arendt, like liberals, recognises the negative liberty "to choose *not* to engage in politics" as an important option.[38] To have no such liberty is to live

under tyranny, and she does not fail to underline the significant difference between tyranny and "constitutional, limited government" where freedom *from* politics is guaranteed.[39] However, she departs from the liberal convention in insisting that life devoted to politics is morally superior to all other ways of life, claiming that humans can realise their potentiality in full only in political action. This is why freedom from politics is for Arendt a fundamentally inadequate ideal. To use Berlin's imagery again, a person in liberal society in Arendt's view must be able to have many open doors of various kinds in front of him, including the bourgeois door to enjoy privacy and family life. However, there is only one door to choose to walk through if a person is to be genuinely free. It is the door leading *to* the public realm because "to *be* free and to act are the same" (153).

The Value of Political Freedom

Both in terms of style and content, Arendt's discussion of political freedom significantly differs from a majority of more mainstream theorists', but her conception of freedom is not as eccentric or fanciful as is often supposed. It bears a resemblance to Charles Taylor's influential "exercise" conception as well as to the idealist conceptions advanced by T. H. Green and other liberal Hegelians, to the extent that they all conceptualise freedom in terms of "a pattern of action of a certain kind," rather than the absence of constraint or interference by others.[40] This family of conceptions, commonly known as "freedom as self-realisation," crucially departs from negative liberty in arguing that the end of freedom (the X of freedom *to* X) must be "something worth doing or enjoying."[41]

For the purpose of illustration, consider an artist whose life is devoted to dance. Wherein lies his freedom? He is free, according to the negative concept, if he is not prevented, physically or psychologically, or directly or indirectly, by others from dancing

when he chooses to. According to the (positive) concept of freedom as self-realisation, he is free when he is actually dancing in such a way that he may be meaningfully described as realising what his life is for, namely, dance. This normally requires certain preconditions and settings, from a proper pair of shoes to a stage and an audience, just as Arendtian political action takes place on "a kind of theater" regulated by laws, citizenship and other institutional settings (154).

Clearly, freedom as self-realisation can take a strongly individualist form if it is conceptualised as one's freedom to fulfil one's purposes as one conceives of them. This configuration of idealism and individualism is arguably what Mill aims to achieve in *On Liberty*. However, as I discussed earlier, Arendt, unlike Mill, assumes a monistic conception of the good life and gives moral authority to the political way of life over the others.[42] Consequently, dance to our hypothetical dancer is what politics is to humans *in general* in Arendt's political thought. As human potentiality can be fully realised only in political life, men and women must choose to speak and act in the public realm if they are to live a genuinely good life—if, that is, they are to be fully human.

Why does Arendt privilege politics over other human activities? Why is there an essential connection between freedom, politics, and the good life? The answer is found in Arendt's conception of man. True, she is reluctant to discuss "human nature" in general or "Man" in the abstract.[43] However, what she rejects is a *static* conception of human nature; she does not refrain from making important general assumptions about human beings, so long as these assumptions are seen as durable and yet changeable human "conditions." It is those assumptions that ultimately underpin her claim about freedom and politics, and they are adopted from two philosophers that exercised enormous influence over Arendt's thought: Aristotle and Heidegger.

First, she appropriates Aristotle's "definition" of man as a political animal. By this she does not mean, as ordinary language analysis would suggest, somebody who seeks power or somebody who politicises everything or somebody who indulges in his theatrical talent on a public stage.[44] Nor does Arendt mean, as our arguably standard conception of politics would have it, somebody who represents his "group interests" in the public domain.[45] Rather, by "political animal" Arendt means the ideal of man who comes to an *agon*-like public realm out of concern for the world, and deliberates and exchanges opinions with his fellow citizens about the common good—about *what* the community should strive for as well as *how* to achieve the agreed ends. In engaging in this kind of activity, political animals are rewarded with perfection, self-development and the disclosure of identity. By contrast, the life of a political animal that does not speak or act in public "has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men."[46]

With this Aristotelian notion Arendt combines another, and quasi-Heideggerian, conception of man as a "natal." Following Heidegger, she believes that nature endlessly reproduces itself, having no beginning or end. Also following Heidegger, Arendt sees no distinction or individuality in nature; humans and *they alone* are "unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities." Then, she sharply departs from Heidegger by replacing death (mortality) with birth (natality) as a fundamental existential condition of man. This means two things. First, in Arendt's work, man is conceptualised doubly as a beginning and a beginner: a beginning in that a man's life begins when he is born, interrupting the cycle of nature; and a beginner in that man is capable of beginning something new that would not have happened if he had not acted. In Arendt's words: "men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin."[47]

Second, unlike Heidegger, Arendt considers the everyday, man-made world and a web of human relationships individuals are born in and "thrown into" to be a part of the authentic human condition. Man is a being-in-the-world-with-others, and his good life consists in preserving and improving *this* man-made world in cooperation with his fellow beings-in-the-world-with-others.[48] If we are to live well, we must take the initiative to contribute to the institutions, political culture and "in-betweenness" that we inherited from our predecessors. To take such initiative is to "insert ourselves into the human world," and this "insertion" confirms our existence in the world we share with others.[49] A person who chooses to withdraw from politics, by contrast, does not live a fully human life because he is deprived of an opportunity to actualise his full potentiality in the sight of his fellow "natals."

In short, Arendt thinks that the political freedom to act is desirable because it is only in political action that man's potentiality is actualised, his unique identity manifested and his being-in-the-world-with-others reaffirmed. In this sense, "to be human and to be free are one and the same" (167). In Berlin's view, by contrast, negative liberty as non-interference is "a truer and more humane ideal" because man, due to the truth of value pluralism, is a choice-making creature and cannot be otherwise. Berlin and Arendt both believe that freedom is essential to what it means to be human. But as their views of human nature significantly differ, they disagree on the most satisfactory meaning of the term "freedom." What lies beneath the two thinkers' dispute over freedom is therefore a deeper disagreement over human nature itself: the vision of human beings as choice-making creatures versus that of human beings as political animals endowed with the gift of natality. This is the most fundamental theoretical difference that divides Berlin and Arendt.

Freedom, Politics, and Individuality

My argument may be illuminated further by looking at a private letter that Berlin sent in 1966 to Bernard Crick, whose political theory was explicitly indebted to Arendt's work.[50] The letter is a valuable source of information because it records Berlin's direct, if preliminary, comments on Arendt's conception of political freedom. He made no such comments in print because he did not "wish to enter into any relations with" Arendt, "not even those of hostility."[51] The letter, in other words, gives us a glimpse of Berlin's opinions on Arendt's *theory* that he hardly ever expressed in public due to his aversion to Arendt the *theorist*.[52]

One point that Berlin makes, unsurprisingly, is that the notion of political freedom is prone to abuse. If the freedom to act in politics is considered more genuine than the negative liberty to brood over private matters, forcing the brooder into politics against his express will may be seen as liberating. This falls into the dangerous Rousseauian/authoritarian logic of "forcing men to be free." Second, anticipating later critics' challenge to Arendt's strict separation between "the social" and "the political,"[53] Berlin objects to Arendt's narrow conception of politics. In his view, politics is messier and less normatively infused than Arendt would like it to be. It involves not only distinctly political issues such as the search for the common good, but also important social and economic issues that Arendt does not regard as properly political, including defence, policing, and social justice. Berlin writes: "'Raison d'etre [*sic*] of politics is freedom', says Miss A[rendt]. Why? Why not justice, peace, decent standards of life and conduct, culture, etc, etc.?"[54]

Another, and arguably more important issue that elusively emerges in Berlin's letter to Crick is the desirability of a collective life devoted to the common good. Berlin

addresses this issue more directly in an essay entitled "The Birth of Greek Individualism."[55] Here, he focuses on the fourth century B.C. when the classical outlook of Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Thucydides, and Herodotus dramatically declined to be replaced by the Hellenistic outlook of Stoics and Epicureans. In the former world, the life of the individual was always considered in functional relation to the life of the *polis*, and politics as a means to pursing private goals simply did not exist. This outlook, Berlin suggests, is akin to "what today is called an *engagé* attitude to politics."[56] On his reading, Arendt is one of the contemporary theorists who hold this attitude.

Berlin is not mistaken. Arendt indeed admires the classical outlook with considerable nostalgia, contrasting the glory of the ancients with the fall of the moderns. In her work, the *polis* "permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit" is praised in contrast to the capitalist market fuelling our consumerist culture;[57] acting and initiative-taking, expressive and creative citizens of ancient Athens are favourably compared to monotonously behaving individuals in twentieth-century mass society; and the public happiness that the ancients used to enjoy is contrasted to the satisfaction of private desires that the moderns endlessly pursue.

Berlin disagrees. Unlike Arendt, he doubts that "the decline of the 'organic' community" in the fourth century B.C. was "an unmixed disaster." The decline on the contrary may have liberated individuals from "a sense of suffocation in the *polis*."[58] The term "suffocation" is indicative of Berlin's distinctly liberal worry. He finds the classical ideal of *polis* life excessively moralistic. He in consequence cherishes the emergence of the sphere of privacy in the Hellenistic outlook; individuals were now able to choose more "freely"—in the negative sense of the term—what ends to pursue and what life to live. Arendt, by contrast, finds no such positivity in the Hellenistic outlook. She calls

Stoics and Epicureans mere "popular and popularizing sectarians of late antiquity," dismissing their notion of inner freedom as "derivative" (147). Where Berlin sees the birth of a new individualism and indeed "a new conception of life,"[59] Arendt sees freedom's retreat from the world to the self—safe and comforting but solitary, dark, invisible and inauthentic. In her view, with the decline of *polis* life the original and authentic meaning of freedom began to sink into oblivion.

Importantly, Berlin's appreciation of Greek individualism does not indicate that he is more deeply committed to the normative value of individuality than Arendt. Arendt's point is precisely that individuality cannot be fully realised if one stays outside the public realm, if one chooses to embrace the liberal notion of freedom from politics. If men and women wish to "show who they really and inexchangeably [are]," they *must* enter the public realm to take the initiative to serve the common good.[60] Arendt's endorsement of individuality and human plurality is in this way paradoxically anchored in her monist conception of the good life. Berlin thinks very differently. His conception of the good life is unequivocally pluralist. He believes that politics (or "the political") is but one sphere of human life, and that the political way of life is but one way of leading a potentially fulfilling life. The ways in which men and women express their individuality must be manifold because human values are irreducibly many and not all of them are political. The incapacity for appreciating such deep pluralism is in Berlin's view one of the chief weaknesses of "the *engagé* attitude to politics." What the two theorists disagree over, then, is not the value of individuality as such; it is *what kind* of individuality humanity should strive for.

Conclusion: Bringing Human Nature Back In

Many of the individual points of disagreement between Berlin and Arendt that I have discussed recur in the contemporary debate over freedom, democracy, and political participation, not least because of the two thinkers' enormous influence over two rival groups of theorists, known as pluralist liberals and agonistic democrats. The liberals, represented by the late John Rawls, wish to respect "the fact of pluralism" characterising modern democratic societies; they seek to realise a thinly "political" conception of justice on which citizens, in spite of their numerous differences as individuals, can agree through "overlapping consensus"; and the liberals want to give each and every member of the society an opportunity to live according to his own conception of the good.[61]

The agonistic critics find these ideals fundamentally inadequate.[62] The contemporary liberal project, they argue, fails to see that the purpose of political participation is not only to exercise some control over collective decision-making but also to acquire a sense of what a person can achieve as an irreplaceable part of the demos—a sense, that is, of identity and solidarity. Ignoring this side of democratic participation, theorists like Rawls reduce politics to a "mere activity of allocation among competing interests."[63] Such degradation of politics, agonists argue, is exacerbated by the endorsement of merely negative liberty perpetuating the cynical view of politics as "who gets what and how." This charge in turn strikes contemporary liberals as overblown. In their view, negative liberty is a prerequisite for political life, for this cannot be fully pursued if basic liberties such as the freedom of expression are negated in the first place.

Today, these points of disagreement are typically seen as stemming from a deeper difference over the concept of politics.[64] This is not wrong. Contemporary liberals and their agonistic critics certainly conceptualise politics differently. The liberals hope to limit the sphere of politics to allow each individual to flourish as he sees fit for himself,

whereas the agonists believe that political participation has the elevating effect to transform passive subjects into active citizens. But what lies beneath this difference is an even deeper disagreement over human nature itself. This is the case because, as my discussion of Berlin and Arendt has demonstrated, one cannot conceptualise what politics is and ought to be unless one makes important assumptions about the relationship between political activities and other spheres of human life; and this requires certain basic assumptions about human beings and what makes their lives worthwhile.[65] Consequently, if we are to move the contemporary debate forward, we must look deeper into the heart of the controversy: we must tackle the issue of human nature head-on.

It is perhaps hard to bring human nature back on the agenda today, when political theorists retreat *en masse* from "foundational" issues. While the late Rawls and his followers have developed an "unfoundational" approach so as to remove "comprehensive" issues from political thinking, many of their critics have committed themselves to more uncompromising *anti*-foundationalism, arguably over-reacting to the simplistic liberal universalism characterising Rawls's early work.[66] Yet the question of human nature must be raised anew if we are to adequately assess the merits of competing theories of freedom because the normative significance of freedom is not a stand-alone question; the answer ultimately depends on our thinking about what it means to be human. This Berlin saw with exceptional clarity. If we find ourselves fundamentally disagreeing with each other over the most satisfactory meaning of freedom, Berlin argues, the dispute should not be seen as following from "different interpretations of a single concept." Rather, it represents "profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life" (212). It is *this* difference that divided Berlin and Arendt half a century ago. It continues to divide us today.

Notes

[1] Berlin to Morton White, 6 February 1959, in Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Homes (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009), 676. More such remarks will be found in the forthcoming third and fourth volumes of Berlin's collected letters.

[2] Berlin to "Izzy" [i.e. Isidor F. Stone], 13 February 1975. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Berlin 209, fols. 262–3, 263.

[3] Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 253.

[4] Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes, in Berlin, *Enlightening*, 430.

[5] Berlin to William Phillips, 7 May 1963, in Berlin, *Enlightening*, 430.

[6] Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 82.

[7] The hostility was one-way because the few comments Arendt made on Berlin show no sign of emotion, positive or negative. See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 27; Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, Volume 2, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (München: Piper, 2002), 654; Arendt and Mary McCarthy, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 254; and Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), 535.

[8] See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, new ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), li; Dana R. Villa, "Hannah Arendt: From Philosophy to Politics," in *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Authors*

and Arguments, ed. Catherine H. Zuckert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 119; and David Caute, *Isaac & Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 262–72.

[9] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), revised and reprinted in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166–217; see also his "Introduction" to *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), also reprinted in *Liberty*, pp. 3–54; hereafter page references to "Two Concepts" and to the "Introduction" are cited in the text; Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" (1961) in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 143–71; hereafter cited in the text.

[10] There are some notable, though inadequate, exceptions to this rule. They are Bernard R. Crick, *Freedom as Politics* (Sheffield, UK: University of Sheffield, 1966); Hannah F. Pitkin, "Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?" *Political Theory* 16 (1988): 523–52; and Iván Zoltán Dénes, "Personal Liberty and Political Freedom: Four Interpretations," *European Journal of Political Theory* 7 (2008): 81–98.

[11] Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 41.

[12] Berlin and Arendt use "he" to refer to "he or she" and often use "man" to mean "human." This essay adopts their terminology for the sake of consistency.

[13] I take this to be Berlin's final word on this issue, but there is room for different interpretations. See David Miller, "Constraints on Freedom," in *The Liberty Reader*, ed. David Miller (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 183–99.

[14] C. B. Macpherson, "Berlin's Division of Liberty," in *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 102.

[15] Mario Ricciardi, "Berlin on Liberty," in *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin*, ed. George Crowder and Henry Hardy (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 136.

[16] Ricciardi, "Berlin on Liberty," 137.

[17] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 146. The similarity between Berlin's negative liberty and Hobbes's "liberty or freedom properly understood" in *Leviathan* is often overstated. See Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" in *Philosophical Papers, Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 212–29; and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[18] Berlin used the term "liberal" instead of "negative" (and "romantic" instead of "positive") during the early 1950s, but he changed his terminology by 1958 when he presented "Two Concepts of Liberty" as a lecture. See Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[19] Michael Kenny, "Isaiah Berlin's Contribution to Modern Political Theory," *Political Studies* 48 (2000): 1037.

[20] Isaiah Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), 121.

[21] Isaiah Berlin and Steven Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes," *Salmagundi* 120 (1998): 92–93.

[22] Isaiah Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Liberty*, 218–51.

[23] Berlin recounts his meetings with these and other Russian artists on several occasions, including in Isaiah Berlin, "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956," in *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2d ed. (London: Pimlico, 1998), 198–254.

[24] This aspect of Berlin's thought is highlighted in John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995).

[25] Berlin and Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin," 101, emphasis added.

[26] Jeremy Waldron, "Arendt's Constitutional Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 201–19.

[27] This is why Tim Gray's analysis of Arendt's political freedom as a "status" conception is inadequate. Tim Gray, *Freedom* (Basingstoke, UK: McMillan, 1991), 46–50.

[28] The prime example of the mid-twentieth-century literature on political culture is Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956). I am not suggesting that this body of work *directly* influenced Arendt.

[29] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 146.

[30] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 52.

[31] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

[32] Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[33] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

[34] Quentin Skinner, "Two Concepts of Citizenship," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 55 (1993): 411.

[35]Arendt, *On Revolution*, 279.

[36] See Skinner, "Two Concepts of Citizenship," 415–16.

[37] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 279.

[38] Dana R. Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 411.

[39] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 218.

[40] Quentin Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002), 242. See Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?"; and Thomas Hill Green, "Lecture on 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract'," in *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, ed. Paul Harris and John Morrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 194–212.

[41] Green, "Lecture," 199.

[42] See Villa, *Public Freedom*, 331.

[43] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 10–11, 193.

[44] Waldron, "Arendt's Constitutional Politics," 201–2.

[45] For an overview of this conception of politics, see John G. Gunnell, "The Genealogy of American Pluralism: From Madison to Behavioralism," *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique*17 (1996): 253–65.

[46] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

[47] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 97, 246.

[48] See Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 109–10.

[49]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176–77.

[50] Berlin to Bernard Crick, 29 March 1966. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Berlin 173, fols. 116–19. See also Berlin's published criticism of Crick's view in "Introduction," 34–35.

[51] Berlin to Martin Peretz, 22 November 1974. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Berlin 208, fol. 202.

[52] Two interviews, published during Berlin's lifetime, are notable exceptions to this rule. See Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 81–85; and Berlin and Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin," 107–8.

[53] See, for example, Hannah F. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blog: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[54] Berlin to Crick, fol. 118.

[55] Isaiah Berlin, "The Birth of Greek Individualism," in *Liberty*, 287–321.

[56] Berlin, "The Birth of Greek Individualism," 304.

[57] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 41.

[58] Berlin, "Greek Individualism," 321.

[59] Berlin, "Greek Individualism," 321.

[60]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 41.

[61] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). For an insightful discussion of Berlin's value pluralism and its relationship to Rawls's "fact of pluralism," see Peter Lassman, *Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[62] See, for example, Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005); and James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[63] Chantal Mouffe, "The Limits of John Rawls's Pluralism," *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 4 (2005): 226.

[64] See, for example, Mouffe, *On the Political*; Julia Skorupska, "Liberal Dilemmas and the Concept of Politics," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13 (2008): 297–320; and

William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 385–411.

[65] See Eric Nelston, "Liberty: One Concept Too Many?" *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 58–78.

[66] The term "unfoundational" was proposed by Joshua Cohen in "Minimalism About Human Rights: The Most We Can Hope For?" *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12 (2004): 190–213. As for anti-foundationalism, see, for example, Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2d ed. (London: Verso, 2001).