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The Position of Negative Liberty in Value Pluralism

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In political philosophy Isaiah Berlin’s work is often cited for its coherent identification of plural values. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin highlights this pluralism that exists between values by way of negative and positive liberty. In negative liberty individuals have “the freedom from,” and in positive liberty individuals have “the freedom to.” While a differentiation may seem inconsequential at first, Berlin recognizes that in expressing one of these values the other value may be sacrificed; the freedom from interference may restrict some from fully realizing their goals and vice versa. If this is the case but both values are still deemed valuable, how does one decide which to choose?

What Berlin and other liberal pluralists like William Galston want to say, - is that despite values being incomparable and/or incommensurable, there is a minimum requirement of negative liberty that is a necessary accompaniment to value pluralism. Choices can be made between negative and positive liberty, but to enable such a choice some minimum amount of negative liberty must necessarily exist for such a choice to be possible. For many the freedom from interference to choose is an important aspect of their cultural identity. In many Western countries, negative liberty, such as the negative liberty that does not interfere with choice, is a hallmark of democratic citizenship and individualism; however, is negative liberty necessary for choice, and more importantly is it a necessary attribute of value pluralism?

The fact that negative liberty is held by so many is not sufficient justification to grant it a privileged position; consensus does not entail truth. Additionally, what is often thought of as a consensus in the value of negative liberty is merely an illusion. Negative liberty may be held in common by all, but individuals may differ in its specific application. Value pluralism describes how values can conflict, but it provides no valuable tool to determine one value over the other. Liberal pluralists who claim negative liberty is entailed by value pluralism are merely granting the value a status separate from other values based on a firm conviction. The choice argument used to defend this position is not sufficient because negative liberty is not necessary for choice and in some cases may actually restrict choice. Though a minimum degree of negative liberty may be ideal to most people, it is not a necessary component of value pluralism. Value pluralism posits that there may be many ways to express human flourishing, but it does not set any requirements.

How then are we to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable political organization? While this specific question is beyond the scope of my research, it may be that value pluralism has nothing much to say about what is or is not acceptable. If no value can be put in a position by which we judge action as I argue in my paper, then we may only be able to acknowledge value pluralism as a multiplicity of values and the necessary sacrifice of some values. Further research in this area of philosophy is important because a better understanding of how values work in political organizations may be able to help reduce conflict by identifying where clashes fundamentally exists.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.