

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE LIBERTY: THE EARLY DEBATE

Liberal writers use the terms 'liberty' and 'freedom' synonymously. For them,

liberty or freedom is the supreme value which must be the guiding principle of all

public policy. It is generally the liberty of individual which they wish to protect,

and it is defined as 'the absence of restraint' or 'the absence of constraint or coercion'. What types of constraints beset the man which are sought to be removed in pursuance of the principle of liberty or freedom?

To illustrate this point we may refer to the Atlantic Charter (1941), a declaration

of 'Four Freedoms', which was drawn up during the Second World War (1939—

45) by President Roosevelt of the United States and Prime Minister Churchill of

the United Kingdom to indicate their war aims. The four freedoms were:

freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear, freedom from want.

Can we classify these four freedoms on the basis of some common features?

D.D. Raphael, in his Problems of Political Philosophy (1976) has identified two

pairs comprising these four freedoms:

The first pair of freedoms specify two kinds of action which should be free or unrestrained; they answer the question, freedom to do what?

'Freedom of speech' is freedom to say what one likes. 'Freedom of worship' is freedom to practise whatever religion one chooses. The second pair of freedoms in the Atlantic Charter specify two kinds of restraint which should be removed or prevented: they answer the question, freedom from what? 'Freedom from fear' claims that men should not be prevented by fear from doing whatever they choose to do, fear of a Government with secret police such as the Nazis used, or fear of war and insecurity.

'Freedom from want' claims that men should not be prevented by want from doing what they would choose to do, want or poverty due to

unemployment, the lack of living wage, or the inability to work because of sickness or old age.

It is significant that the two types of freedoms, included in the said Charter of

four freedoms have a much wider application than a statement of aims of the

Second World War. They could be used to highlight the aims of public policy in

a modern state, particularly a welfare state. The first type of freedoms, such as

freedom of speech and freedom of worship, symbolize the negative aspect of

liberty. They imply a negative role of the state, that is not to restrict the individual

in pursuing his self-appointed goals. The second type of freedoms, such as freedom

from fear and freedom from want, symbolize the positive aspect of liberty. They

call for a positive role of the state, that is to remove certain impediments in the

way of the individual in exercising his freedom. Once this basic distinction between

negative and positive aspects of liberty is recognized, the actual lists of freedoms

falling under each category can be suitably enlarged. It is also essential to remember

that these two types of freedom, namely negative liberty and positive liberty, are

not opposed to each other. In fact, they are complementary; they are two sides

of the same coin. They are incomplete without each other, although some thinkers

accord primacy to one over the other.

It is also important to note that the struggle for liberty started in seventeenth