Dangerous Liberties

Isaiah Berlin’s Critique of Positive Liberty Revisited

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Abstract

The present article revisits what Gerald Crowder has called Isaiah Berlin’s 'inversion thesis': the notion that some element in ideals of positive liberty opens up, psychologically rather than conceptually, for paternalism, intolerance, and sometimes even repression - all in the name of liberty. To this end, I reconstruct Berlin’s critique of positive liberty through Gerald MacCallum's schema of freedom as a triadic concept (freedom of someone, from something, to do something). This exercise reveals that, in contrast to what previous accounts of "Two Concepts" have recognized, Berlin there criticizes positive ideals of liberty for two reasons: first, their focus on freedom from internal rather than external constraints to the self; and, secondly, their interest in freedom of will formation, rather than in the realm of action. The implications are that, in contrast to what William Galston suggests, Berlin's 'inversion thesis' does not only apply to the positive ideal of liberty as autonomy and so-called Enlightenment liberalism. It also applies to more Romantic ideals of positive liberty, such as authenticity and self-realization – ideals that are gaining power among ordinary people in the Western world today.
I. Introduction

If we care about diversity and tolerance, then we must be constantly on guard against ideals that open up for paternalism or even coercion; especially if they do so in the name of true liberty. This was the simple yet compelling thesis in Isaiah Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty.*

Since its conception, half a century has passed, the Cold War has ended and political theorists now grapple with empirical problems Berlin could hardly have foreseen. Today, the vast majority in Western countries embraces typically liberal values, not only on a political but just as much, if not more, on a personal level. A long line of value studies have shown that younger generations in these countries embrace freedom values such as self-expression, authenticity and autonomy. At the same time, due to increasing flows of migration to many Western countries, these young autonomy-oriented generations are also more and more exposed to individuals from cultural and religious minorities with quite different values from their own. The impulse to impose their own liberal ways of life on these minorities, and to do so in the name of their freedom, therefore seems to loom large.

Indeed, we find this impulse at the center of several political debates over the recent years on how to deal with mainly Muslim immigrants in highly secularized European countries. Not least do we find it in *l’affaire du foulard,* which in France culminated in the 1998 law that bans all conspicuous religious symbols, such as the head scarf, from public schools. One of the arguments in favor of this law was namely that that such a ban would in fact increase rather than decrease the liberty of the Muslim girls who claimed they wanted to wear head scarves, because they were not truly free in wanting to do so in the first place.

The goal of this paper is to better understand why, according to Berlin, certain ideals of liberty open up for this ‘inversion of liberty’, and by what logic such a transformation can occur. The underlying assumption is not that limitations on liberty, such as the French law against religious symbols, are never justified – but simply that we must be on guard against ideals of liberty that allow us to portray and indeed perceive of such limitations as acts of liberation.

Judging from recent accounts, the main culprit is found in the Enlightenment idea of ‘liberation by reason’ and ‘critical self-reflection’. This has been argued by William Galston, whose division between ‘Enlightenment liberalism’ and ‘Reformation liberalism’ appears to be inspired by Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty,* as well as by Chandran Kukathas, Charles Larmore and Desmond King, among others. In contrast, my conclusions suggest that to single out

3 Insert references from Christian Joppke, Desmond King etc.
4 I am of course aware that other principles were at play, perhaps even more forcefully, in this case – such as the French notion of laïcité and civic republicanism. Yet, the existence of arguments from freedom has been shown by for example Jeremy Jennings ‘Citizenship, Prepublicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France’, in *British Journal of Political Science,* 30 (2000), p.575-598, in particular p.584, pp.588-91. Note to self: talk to Ozge Celik.
5 I will return to this and outline the issue at stake more precisely in the next section.
Enlightenment liberalism and liberation by reason as the main enemy of diversity represents a treacherous oversimplification of reality. It is an oversimplification because Berlin, as this paper will show, directed his critique not primarily at liberation by reason but something more general, which is equally at play in ideals of liberty that shun or even fight reason. And it is treacherous because it blinds us to threats that stem from ideals of freedom we encounter daily that do not extol reason or reflection, but feeling and authenticity; and that may just as strongly invite the impulse to disrespect or even repress diversity in the name of liberty.

My argument unfolds in the following steps. In section II, I argue that one of Berlin’s main aims in *Two Concepts of Liberty* was what Gerald Crowder has called his ‘inversion thesis’ – to show how positive ideals of liberty, as opposed to negative, open up for ‘liberating’ people against their explicit will. Yet, as it turns out, little has been said regarding this aspect of Berlin’s argument, and that which has been said remains unsatisfactory in several regards. In section III, I therefore offer a reconstruction of Berlin’s inversion thesis. This reveals that Berlin’s critique is not directed primarily at Enlightenment ideals of liberty, such as moral autonomy, critical self-reflection, and reason ruling over passion and desire. I show that while Berlin does criticize these ideals, he treats them as mere *examples of* two more general characteristics that he believed open up for the inversion of liberty: the focus on constraints that are *internal*, rather than external, to the self; and the focus on freedom in *preference formation*, rather than in acting upon one’s preferences.

In section IV, I return to the primary suspect, Enlightenment liberty, or liberation by reason. I there show that this ideal hardly exhausts the ‘risky’ combinations that follow from Berlin’s implicit framework. In fact, I instead suggest that the romantic ideals of liberty as self-expression and authenticity are just as likely as the enlightened ones, if not even more, to be the real culprits behind recent instances of the inversion of liberty, such as for example the head scarf debate in France. In section V I summarize the main conclusions from the paper (*note to the reader*: parts IV and V are still far from finished in this preliminary version).

Ultimately, then, the reason for revisiting Berlin’s inversion thesis stems from his own *idée maîtresse* that we ought to pay more attention to the metaphors and ideas that guide our thinking, or else we will be mislead to treat what are actually normative commitments as empirical necessities or psychological facts. The framework that results from my reconstruction of Berlin’s warnings against positive liberty does precisely this: it helps us see that the widespread and ultimately romantic ideals of freedom as authenticity or self-expression are precisely this, ideals, and not, or at least not only, the psychological facts that they are often treated as in contemporary Western culture.

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6 In fact, this is what Berlin thought to be the primary goal of political theory. For similar views, see Blau in PT 2004, Bernard Williams, 'From Freedom to Liberty: the Construction of a Political Value', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 30 (2001), 3-26 ;Ryan Patrick Hanley, 'Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry', *American Political Science Review*, 98 (2004), 327-339
II. Why Revisit Berlin?
In the following, I will first outline the interpretation of Two Concepts which informs the present paper, as well as the more precise nature of Berlin’s warnings that positive liberty opens up for the inversion of liberty. This will show why the inversion thesis is relevant for us today. I will then, in the subsequent section, argue that previous research fails to provide a satisfactory account of his inversion thesis, the up-shot of which is that there is a need to revisit this part of Berlin’s argument.

Interpreting Two Concepts of Liberty
Despite its close to hegemonic influence on theoretical discussions of freedom during half a century, Isaiah Berlin’s Two Concepts of Liberty is notorious for its ambiguous use of terminology and at times overt inconsistencies. Two things are evident: Berlin wishes to distinguish between negative and positive notions of liberty, and he clearly wants to warn us to the potential dangers that reside in the latter. But the status of these two notions, as well as the reasons we should be on guard against positive liberty are widely disputed.

For a long time, the most common line of interpretation of Berlin’s essay assumed that its primary goal was to distinguish between two ways of defining what freedom is, two concepts of freedom. On this reading, negative freedom assumes that freedom results from the lack of obstacles (freedom from), while positive freedom assumes that it results rather from the presence of possibilities (freedom to). Negative and positive freedom in these senses are also often equated to an opportunity and an exercise concept of freedom, respectively; or formal versus effective freedom.\(^7\) This is the reading that lead Gerald MacCallum to his famous critique that Berlin in fact presents a flawed distinction, conjuring up a false opposition between a negative “freedom from” and a positive “freedom to” –– when in fact, MacCallum claimed, every account of freedom must by necessity involve both. On MacCallum’s view, freedom is always a triadic concept, and thus any ideal of freedom involves three variables: the agent, the constraints, and the activity of freedom. In other words, according to MacCallum’s definition, when we say someone is (or should) be free, we must always answer the following questions: who is (or should) be free (1), from what constraint (2), and to do what (3)?\(^8\)

However, as has been pointed out by numerous Berlin scholars in more recent times, there is something deeply unsatisfactory about the above reading of Berlin’s distinction.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) See Taylor 1997, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty?” and Carol Gould 1988, Rethinking Democracy. Others, finally, see only negative freedom as a formal concept and its positive counterpart rather as a substantial ideal, and think that this is why Berlin is so critical of the latter. As we will see, Berlin himself says little that would allow such an interpretation of his distinction; but his terminology has nevertheless lead him to be portrayed as a champion of ‘formal’ or ‘opportunity’ freedom (Crowder would agree; see Crowder 2004, p.67). This is probably due to the fact that Berlin uses T.H. Green’s terminology but applies it differently. For Green, positive liberty goes further than negative liberty, which means that it includes it. Maria Dimova-Cookson, ‘A New Scheme of Positive and Negative Freedom: Reconstructing T. H. Green on Freedom’, Political Theory, 31 (2003), 508-532 For Berlin, this is clearly not the case. Instead, the two notions are on a more equal level in his analysis.

\(^8\) Gerald MacCallum 1967, “Negative and Positive Freedom”.

Berlin was generally skeptical towards philosophical abstractions ungrounded in political reality. In addition, he explicitly states that these two notions of liberty are “at no great logical distance from one another”, and that their difference lies in having historically moved into divergent directions. He also says that they are two notions ‘held in the world today, each claiming the allegiance of a very large numbers of men’, and that their consequences are “psychological and political”.

Throughout the essay, Berlin also repeatedly refers to negative and positive liberty as two ‘conceptions’, ‘systems of ideas’, or ‘ideals’; describing their nature in terms of what it means that ‘I feel free’, or ‘I identify myself with’ ‘the creed of’ one of the two freedoms. At one point, he even speaks of the two notions as ‘two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life’.

All this suggests that Berlin intended for his distinction to apply not mainly to different formal concepts of freedom, but to different ideals, or conceptions, of freedom that he believed to exercise a significant power over people’s minds. On this reading, negative liberty can be identified, roughly, with the notion of non-interference with a person’s actual, empirical wishes; whereas positive liberty is rather the notion of self-mastery, and more focused, as John Christman says, on “internal achievements of the self” than its negative counterpart.

On the latter reading, Berlin’s main concern is not to distinguish between a negative and on his view valid use of the term freedom, and a positive, purportedly invalid, use of the term. In fact, Berlin is very clear that positive freedom, as opposed to for example the ‘hankering for status’ or equality, does qualify as an ideal of freedom. Neither does he seem to dismiss the inherent value in positive conceptions of freedom. In fact, as has been pointed out by Joshua Cherniss, Berlin seems to regard not only negative but also positive liberty as valuable on its own terms; a stance that may at first seem peculiar, but makes sense in the light of Berlin’s...

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Liberty’, in Crowder and Hardy, eds, The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), pp.119-139, at (unfinished: also see Mario Ricciardi: Berlin’s silence on TCL debate because his aim was never what his critics have interpreted it as (p.122, 126)

13 Crowder 2004, p.68; quote from Christman 2005, p.81. Note that often, Berlin’s positive-negative distinction is mistakenly identified with collective versus individual freedom. However, it has already been argued convincingly that in fact, positive and negative liberty are equally individual ideals. This is also clear, I believe, from the fact that Berlin explicitly speaks of both freedoms as individual, when referring to them as “individual liberty, in either the ‘negative’ or in the ‘positive’ senses of the word” (Berlin 1997, p.408). It is of course true, as has been noted, that Berlin blames positive liberty for being more easily perverted into an idea of freedom as merging one’s individual self into “some super-personal entity – a state, a class, a nation, or the march of history itself” (Ibid., p.398). But he clearly does not identify positive liberty with the latter phenomena; instead, he thinks of them as the potential consequences of believing in positive liberty. For this reading, also see Mario Ricciardi, ‘Berlin on Liberty’, in eds, at, p.132.
value pluralism, according to which human existence often consists in the agonistic choice between many incommensurable ends in life.\(^{14}\)

Instead, Berlin’s chief concern with positive liberty seems to be what Crowder has called his ‘inversion thesis’, i.e. the notion that positive liberty contains a feature that opens up for paternalism, and sometimes even downright oppression, in the name of liberty. I believe it is fair to say that although he also expressed other concerns about positive liberty\(^ {15}\), the inversion thesis remains his most urgent point throughout Two Concepts of Liberty, as well as that which has provoked most discussion among later critics and defenders of Berlin. In the following, I shall describe the nature of this problem in more detail.

The issue at stake: the inversion of liberty

First note that the inversion thesis is not to be equated to the claim that preventing and restricting people from doing what they wish, or even forcing them to do what they say they do not want, is always morally wrong (although it may often be). In fact, Berlin admits that limits on freedom may often be warranted for the sake of other values, such as equality, happiness, peace etc. – again a stance we can make sense of in the light of his value pluralism. He is nevertheless that these acts must never be called acts of liberation, no matter how justified a limitation of liberty they represent.

For example, in a crucial passage, Berlin says the following: “It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good which I am too blind to see: this may, on occasion, be for my benefit; indeed it may enlarge the scope of my liberty. It is another to say that if it is my good, then I am not being coerced, for I have willed it, whether I know this or not, and free (or ‘truly’ free) even while my poor earthly body and foolish mind bitterly reject it”.\(^ {16}\)

Why, then, is this “another” thing? For John Christman, this matter boils down to the “conceptual possibility that tyranny of individuals can be perpetrated in the name of freedom” (p.351). On his reading, Berlin (erroneously) believes that positive liberty justifies tyranny in the name of freedom in a normative sense; or, in other words, that tyranny will logically follow from the premises inherent in positive liberty.\(^ {17}\)

This, on my view, is however another mistaken interpretation of Berlin’s inversion thesis. Berlin was much more of a historian of ideas than a normative theorist. As has been shown again and again by Berlin scholars, his concern throughout his work tends to come back to the concern that words, metaphors and ideas exercise a significant and sometimes treacherous power over human beings – quite independently of normative arguments as to whether \(x\) follows from \(y\) on logical grounds.\(^ {18}\)

\(^{14}\) Insert reference on Cherniss and value pluralism, agonistic choice, Drugge?

\(^{15}\) Such as the possibility that they risk confounding liberty with other values, and that they rely on a monistic instead of a pluralistic view of the nature of values.

\(^{16}\) Two Concepts, p.398.

\(^{17}\) Christman objects that tyranny can in fact only be justified as a means for freedom if we also assume that we know more about the internal structure of other people’s desires and beliefs than they know themselves, and that since “the practical impossibility of this scenario undercuts the force of this difficulty”, Berlin’s fear of tyranny is in fact exaggerated. I agree that the latter would be true, if Berlin’s fears were indeed only conceptual. But, as I see it, they are not.

\(^{18}\) See for example his The Power of Ideas. Also see Hanley’s, Ricciardi’s, Cherniss’, Hardy’s, and Crowder’s discussion of the matter. Insert more specific references.
On my understanding of Berlin, then, the problem with inversion lies in that he believed the power of words such as ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’ to have particularly problematic political consequences, independently of whether or not these were logically coherent. 19 On Berlin’s view, the problem is that when we limit and prevent others from what they say they want in the name of freedom, we use a language and an imagery that effectively silences all dissent. We undermine the equal status of our opponents and strip them of what is perhaps their last defense, namely arguing that we have no business patronizing, or even tyrannizing them – because, we can now respond, we are in fact not patronizing or tyrannizing them at all, but enhancing their freedom.20 Furthermore, when this happens with a minority that is already in an unequal position, as is often the case, the problem is not so much a lack of freedom but, perhaps unexpectedly, of equality.21

Some readers might now object that even if there are ideals of liberty that invite the impulse to liberate others against their will, this is not in itself a risk, as long as those who hold it refrain from promoting these particular ideals; for example because they also believe that they do not have the moral authority to do so, as might indeed be required by political liberalism.22 But, as I see it, this objection builds on precisely the assumption that Berlin questions: namely, that freedom is just like any kind of value in our ordinary language.23

Surely, this is, now perhaps more than ever, simply not the case. When we think about freedom, it is not just any kind of value – it is often the very reason for respecting other people’s choices in the first place. It is therefore very hard to imagine a person who believes that although X is in fact un-free in choosing something, and although it is possible for her to liberate X, she should still refrain from arguing for this, or even from simply liberating her, just because she does not have the right to impose freedom on X – even if she does refrain from imposing other conceptions of the good on X. This is because if we really think that what we are imposing on others is freedom, then it is simply hard to see it as an imposition to begin with.24

It should now be clear that the inversion of liberty is relevant not only as an important tenet in Berlin’s thought, but as a political risk in our contemporary culture. The problem at the heart of this paper, then, is the disturbing possibility that we allow ourselves to dismiss dissent as irrelevant and our opponents as inherently less worth listening to than ourselves –

19 “Almost every moralist in human history has praised freedom,” Two Concepts, p. 393. Find a better quote!
20 Two Concepts, p.398. This, I believe, is also the reason why Berlin unexpectedly praises Hobbes for being, “at any rate, more candid: he did not pretend that a sovereign does not enslave: he justified this slavery, but at least he did not have the effrontery to call it freedom” (p.411).
21 Thus, in the example of the Muslim women who were prevented by the 1998 law in France to wear headscarves in schools, the observation that they were in this case a doubly unequal group (as Muslims and as women), makes the inversion of liberty even more morally pernicious. See Spinner Halev 2001 in Ethics on this equality aspect of multiculturalism…
22 But this objection seems analogous to the notion that any beliefs about when human life begins can be combined with have nothing for legislation on abortion. Surely, the notion that a phoetus is a human life and that killing it equals murder is a stance that is hard to combine with a permissive view towards abortion. In a similar manner, if we claim to be
24 For the widespread attachment to liberty in mass values in Western liberal democracies, see for example Inglehart and Welzel 2005.
because we see them as un-free to begin with. This does not imply that we need to condemn ideals that allow for this inversion altogether, but that we must be aware of their dangerous potential, and that we should exercise the appropriate caution when invoking them. These assumptions form the point of departure of the present paper, and this, I believe, is also the ultimate reason why Berlin distinguishes between negative and positive ideals of liberty to begin with, as opposed to ideals regarding equality, friendship or some other kind of value.

**Why revisit the inversion thesis?**

Berlin says that positive and negative liberty are not just any ideals, “but those central ones, with a great deal of human history behind them, and, I dare say, still to come” (p.393) In the light of this, and his more general mission to understand the power of metaphors and ideas, I believe that he wanted to show not only that positive liberty is dangerous, but also why.

To my knowledge, this has only previously been argued by Gerald Crowder, who puts it the following way: “there is a strong undercurrent in his account – never completely explicit but evident none the less – to the effect that the logic of positive liberty as such ought to make us wary. From their individualistic or liberal beginnings, Berlin argues, positive conceptions of liberty have developed in modern times in illiberal and ultimately totalitarian directions. The process by which this has occurred is historically contingent – it could have been otherwise – but it is not merely accidental.”

On Crowder’s reading, which is the only one of which I know that tries to specify the content of this ‘undercurrent’, this consists of Berlin’s observation that positive liberty “contains a feature, not found in the negative concept, that lays it open to authoritarian corruption. This is the idea that human personality is divided between two selves: on the one hand, the ‘higher’ or ‘true’ or authentic self, usually (although not always) associated with reason; on the other, the ‘lower’ or ‘empirical’ self, usually associated with the desires and emotions. Once this distinction is drawn, Berlin argues, the way is open to advocating the suppression of people’s actual desires and wishes in the name of their ‘true’ or ‘real’ self”. Since negative liberty, says Crowder, only “implies the fulfillment of a person’s empirical wishes”, it is not as vulnerable to this inversion.

Nevertheless, this account of the ‘inversion thesis’ remains unsatisfactory in several regards. First, Crowder says the higher self is often but not always identified with reason. This leaves the reader wondering what part reason plays, more exactly, in the inversion thesis. Secondly, as Crowder himself notes elsewhere, Berlin originally equated positive liberty to what he called ‘romantic liberty’. This also seems to suggest that reason, which is not a typically romantic ideal, cannot be the main factor that opens up for the inversion of liberty. This possibility prompts the question of what alternative ways there are to identify a higher self, and how these ideals in turn categorize reason; can it ever be reason that must be suppressed as a part of the ‘lower’ self? Crowder, however, remains silent on these issues.

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27 Yet, this is the only attempt to reconstruct this particular part of Berlin’s argument that I know of, although I am grateful to anyone who disagrees and tells me where to look for other attempts.
Thirdly, although there can be no doubt that the passage Crowder cites takes on a prominent place in Berlin’s own argument, it is also true that Berlin’s rhetoric is often contradictory and fraught with inconsistencies, as Crowder is well aware. Thus, just a few pages later, Crowder is forced to acknowledge that Berlin suggests both in his essay and a later introduction that “the subject of negative liberty could be empirical or authentic”.²⁸ Crowder dismisses this statement as a mistake on Berlin’s part, “since it fits so badly with his central argument, namely the inversion thesis”.²⁹ It remains unclear to the reader, however, why we should be convinced that Crowder’s version of the inversion thesis, which after all relies on little else than one specific passage in Two Concepts, must take priority over what Berlin explicitly says – not only here, but in several parts of the essay.

In fact, when speaking of the inversion of liberty into its opposite, Berlin clearly says that “this magical transformation, or sleight of hand… can no doubt be perpetrated just as easily with the negative concept of freedom, where the self that should not be interfered with is no longer the individual with his actual wishes and needs as they are normally conceived, but the ‘real’ man within, identified with the pursuit of some ideal purpose not dreamed of by his empirical self”. This hardly seems as a passage we can simply reject offhand as a mistake on Berlin’s part. If focusing on an authentic rather than empirical self is not, after all, peculiar to positive, ideals of liberty, but sometimes also applies to negative ideals, then this suggests that Berlin’s critique of positive liberty relied on the observation of some other features which it did not share with negative liberty.³⁰

But if the danger with positive liberty does not, after all, stem from a certain conception of the self that should be free, then what could be its source? Ironically, this question brings us back full circle to one of Berlin’s first critics, Gerald MacCallum. As we saw at the beginning of this section, the latter argued that ideals of freedom differ in their “views on the ranges of the term variables”, i.e. on the real identity of the self that should be free, on what constraints the self should be free from, and in what activities the self should be free to engage. But MacCallum also concludes that “although perhaps not always obvious or dramatic, such differences could lead to vastly different accounts of when persons are free”.³¹ This suggests that if positive liberty does not differ from negative in its view of the self that should be free, perhaps it differs on what constraints it seeks liberation from, and in what activities.

Indeed, both John Christman and Gerald Crowder admit that “the negative and positive ideas could be seen as two broad schools of opinion on how we should give content to MacCallum’s three variables”.³² Yet, neither of the two provides an answer as to how these variables are filled, and neither connects this issue to the inversion thesis. In the following

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²⁹ Ibid.
³⁰ Berlin, TCL, p. 398.
³² Christman claims that “MacCallum’s analysis shows that we should think about freedom as one overarching conceptual schema allowing for several different conceptions. Positive understandings of freedom denote one set of interpretations of the variables in the schema and negative notions another .” Christman 2005, “Saving Positive Freedom, p.81; Crowder 2004, p.78.
section, I will do precisely this. As we will see, this new perspective brings out several unexpected aspects of Berlin’s argument.33

III. The Inversion Thesis Revisited

Berlin, as we saw already in the previous section, acknowledges that not only positive but also negative liberty lends itself to the notion that “the self that should not be interfered with is no longer the individual with his actual wishes and needs as they are normally conceived, but the ‘real’ man within, identified with the pursuit of some ideal purpose not dreamed of by his empirical self”. But at the same time, he insists that positive liberty has nevertheless “lent itself more easily to the splitting of personality into two”. The reason for this, he says, is that it relies on a notion of “freedom as self-mastery, with its suggestion of a man divided against himself”.34

In a similar vein, the first time Berlin addresses the inversion thesis in Two Concepts, he notes that “one way of making this clear” – ‘this’ being the fact that positive and negative liberty, which are not logically far from each other, nevertheless historically came to develop in divergent directions and into direct conflict with each other – “is in terms of the independent momentum which the, initially perhaps quite harmless, metaphor of self-mastery acquired”.

This seems important. Berlin’s point here is clearly not that positive liberty denotes just any idea of control and mastery that, for whatever reason, has become equated to freedom. Instead, positive ideals are in fact perfectly legitimate as notions of freedom, and it is this very fact that makes them risky. Why this is so can be seen by scrutinizing the purportedly dangerous metaphor of self-mastery.

Freedom from internal constraints, not external

The first reason why the metaphor of self-mastery is risky, on Berlin’s view, stems from the fact that it focuses on liberation from constraints that are perceived as internal, rather than.

33 Note that MacCallum offered his triadic concept later than Berlin, so my argument is of course not that Berlin began by thinking of a triadic concept and then developed his own distinction. However, given Berlin’s own reply to MacCallum and later interpretations of Berlin, I do believe it is possible to say that MacCallum offers us a framework through which we can analyse different conceptions of freedom. This reading is supported by the fact that Berlin’s reply to MacCallum’s criotique was very weak( Ricciardi, 'Berlin on Liberty', in eds, at ). Berlin also clearly rejected the main rival to MacCallum’s triadic concept of freedom, namely the dyadic concept of freedom as a ratio between two variables (what a person wants and what he can), championed by for example John Gray, 'On Negative and Positive Liberty', Political Studies, 28 (1980), 507-526 . He also dismissed Mill’s understanding of negative liberty as “the ability to do what one wishes”, because on this ‘ratio’ approach to freedom, we might as well diminish our wishes as expand our area of free action . Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Goodin and Pettit, eds, Contemporary Political Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), pp.391-417, at, p.400 . I thus use MacCallum here in a similar way as Simhony who applies him to someone who lived over a century earlier, TH Green Avital Simhony, 'Beyond Negative and Positive Freedom: T.H. Green's View of Freedom', Political Theory, 21 (1993), 28-54 (PT 1991).

34 Ibid., p.398.
external, to the agent whose freedom is at stake. At one point, Berlin even says explicitly that “the root of the positive idea of freedom as rational self-direction is applied to a man’s inner life” (Ibid., p.403). He also repeatedly returns to the observation that positive ideals focus on “liberating oneself from spiritual slavery” (Ibid., p.397), whereas negative liberty stands out by being concerned with constraints represented by “other persons” and “other men”. Whereas positive notions stress “the freedom which consists in being one’s own master”, negative notions emphasize “the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men”.35

Note that these passages are all concerned with distinguishing between internal and external constraints, rather than between ideals of freedom that focus on reason and those that do not. I therefore suggest that Berlin’s point when it came to constraints on freedom was not that ideals of freedom are dangerous only if they epitomize freedom from the enemies of reason and rationality, but that an ideal of liberty that strives to liberate any occult entity within a man from other parts of himself is vulnerable to the inversion of liberty.

This is not how Berlin is usually portrayed. Christman, for example, gives a much more narrow account of Berlin’s critique of positive liberty, one that is solely focused on reason and rationality. Berlin’s claim, he says, “is that seeing freedom as rational self-mastery allows the direct opposition between freedom in this sense and other (negative) liberties considered canonical among the principles of a just society”. The problem, on Christman’s view, then, is that “according to the conception of positive freedom couched as rational self-mastery, rule of one’s desires and actions by one’s ‘true, that is rational, self’ is the truest expression of freedom.”.36

Nonetheless, my reading suggests that Christman’s account suffers from a subtle, yet important, misdiagnosis of Berlin’s argument. Although Berlin does mention reason and rationality several times, he also recurrently speaks in more general terms of the dangers of acknowledging that a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self needs liberation from internal obstacles. In fact, even though he does in certain passages equate positive liberty with being ruled by reason or with doing what is rational, even more recurrently he exemplifies it with terms such as “self-mastery”, “self-government”, “self-fulfillment” (Ibid., p.398) and “self-realization” (Ibid., p.398). What is common to these ideals, it seems to me, is that they all view freedom as something that applies to a relationship the self has to other parts of itself, independently of whether or not reason is involved in this relationship at all.37

35 Ibid., p.397.
37 Note that although Berlin cautions us against the positive notion of a split personality (Ibid., p.398, p.416), he does not dismiss it as a valid notion of liberty (Ibid., p.400). This unmistakably shows that his purpose is indeed not to say which liberty corresponds best to the ‘real’ meaning of the term, but to show us two different and influential ways of conceiving a valuable state of being which we call free. Thus, the idea of internal enemies need not be psychologically “correct” in order for positive liberty to remain a valid ideal, it does not depend on a Freudian psychology or a compartmentalization of the human cognitive and affective faculties. Instead, it suffices that the notion of internal enemies is meaningful to us. And indeed, judging by the fact that metaphors such as being held captive by one’s passions, held back by one’s fears, or imprisoned by one’s prejudices, are recurrent both within and outside of political theory, it does indeed seem meaningful to speak of internal obstacles to freedom. Neither is there any reason to assume that MacCallum would not accept obstacles as internal, indeed he does openly in his own article (MacCallum 1967, p.323-5).
Moreover, as Christman also notes, positive liberty has its “roots in the political theory of the Romantic Age”. Indeed, before writing *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin wrote a very similar but less famous essay called *Two Concepts of Freedom: Romantic and Liberal*. He there equated positive liberty to romantic liberty, and its negative rival to liberal liberty. But if positive liberty is indeed linked to extolling rational self-mastery, as Christman would have it, this seems puzzling. After all, Romanticism, if we can indeed speak of one such strand, is hardly known for siding with reason, rationality or even self-mastery against passions, feelings, and, sometimes, neuroses — but, in many cases, it takes the very opposite stand and resists reason and rationality on behalf of the latter. With Christman’s reading, then, it is hard to see why Berlin would have first directed his critique at romantic ideals and then turned his critique against the seemingly opposite ideals of Kantian autonomy, or Platonic self-mastery. What is, we might ask, romantic about the typical Kantian notion of autonomy, or indeed the Platonic ideal of self-mastery?

We can make sense of this seeming puzzle, however, by the recognition that for Berlin, the common denominator for both romantic and Kantian, or even Platonic, freedom was a focus on an internal relation the self; on the real, true, authentic self being free from its internal enemies. I argue, then, in contrast to previous accounts of Berlin’s inversion thesis, that the danger with positive liberty consists in his recognition that focusing on internal, rather than external, enemies is always risky — independently of whether or not the internal enemies are desire, passion or something else. As soon as we allow for freedom to become an internal relation, for man to be “divided against himself”, we open up for the disturbing possibility of dismissing other people’s explicit will, because we can now ‘liberate’ them, as it were, from themselves.

**Freedom of preference formation, not action**

Berlin’s inversion thesis amounts, however, to more than the observation that acknowledging internal constraints opens up for the inversion of liberty. Berlin also notes that, for proponents of positive liberty, freedom is “the elimination of obstacles to my will, whatever these obstacles may be – the resistance of nature, of my ungoverned passions, of irrational institutions, of the opposing wills or behavior of others”. This passage seems to contradict what we have said so far, since if positive liberty strives for liberation not only from ‘my ungoverned passions’, but also ‘irrational institutions’ and ‘the opposing wills or behavior of others’, it does not seem to be focused solely on internal obstacles after all.

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40 I also believe this is a better way than Crowder’s to make sense of Berlin’s statement that “conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man” (p.398). Although it may seem, as Crowder suggests, that positive and negative liberty are dealing with different agents of freedom, we are in fact rather dealing with different conceptualizations of obstacles to freedom.
41 Ibid., p.403.
I believe we can solve this otherwise puzzling statement by assuming that Berlin also had another hypothesis regarding what makes certain ideals of liberty vulnerable to inversion, quite apart from whether they focus on internal constraints or not. This second reason consists of a specific stand on what MacCallum would call the third variable, namely the area in which freedom is to be exercised.

This is an aspect of Berlin’s distinction that previous research has neglected. Nevertheless, judging from the three passages from *Two Concepts* where Berlin explicitly contrasts the two notions of liberty, he clearly differentiates between the activities for which the two notions claim freedom. The first time he does this, Berlin says that freedom “in the ‘negative’ sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be, left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?’”. He then goes on to say that freedom in “the positive sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?’”.

The second time Berlin explicitly contrasts the two liberties, he says that “the ‘positive’ sense of liberty comes to light if we try to answer the question, not ‘What am I free to do or be?’, but ‘By whom am I ruled?’ or ‘Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or do?’; whereas negative liberty is the wish for “a free area of action”.

The third time, he speaks of the positive notion as “the freedom which consists in being one’s own master” and its negative counterpart as “the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men”.

Negative liberty, then, is about choosing, doing, or being what I am able to. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is about determining, mastering and controlling what someone does or is. Indeed, if we look further into the text, there is plenty of evidence that for Berlin, negative and positive notions differ in what it is that one must be free to do. He repeatedly speaks of negative freedom as freedom of action (Ibid., p.394, 395, 396, 397, 401 ). For example, he says that negative freedom denotes interference “within the area in which I could otherwise act” (Ibid., my emphasis). He also defines it as the “area in which a man can act” (Ibid., p.393), and a state in which noone is “frustrating my wishes” or “desires” (Ibid., p.393, 396).

When speaking of positive liberty, however, Berlin seldom speaks in terms of action. The wish for positive freedom is, instead, the wish to be “conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes” (Ibid., p.397). Throughout the essay, Berlin in fact identifies positive notions with the freedom to “develop a certain type of character” (Ibid., p.396), to “be governed by myself” (Ibid., p.396), to “be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes; which are my own” (Ibid., p.397), to “conceive my own goals and policies and realize them” (Ibid., p.397), and, finally, to “conceive ends” (Ibid., p.398). It is also the freedom to “plan my life in accordance with my own will”, to “analyse and understand” (Ibid., p.402) and not to “be ruled by myths and ignorance “(Ibid., p.402).

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42 Berlin, TCL, p.393.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., p.396.
All this points to the conclusion that, according to Berlin, negative and positive notions of liberty tend to differ significantly on MacCallum’s third ‘variable’, namely on what someone should be free to do. Proponents of negative liberty hold that one should be free to act upon one’s existing preferences – defenders of positive liberty instead stress that one must be free in forming those preferences in the first place; to conceive and decide what one wants, quite simply.46

Why, then, would this aspect open up for the inversion of liberty? This argument is revealed, I think, when Berlin criticizes T.H. Green for construing freedom so that “if a man chose some immediate pleasure –– which (in whose view?) would not enable him to make the best of himself (what self?) –– what he was exercising was not ‘true’ freedom: and if deprived of it, would not lose anything that mattered. Green was a genuine liberal: but many a tyrant could use this formula to justify his worse acts of oppression” (p.416). Berlin’s claim here seems to be then, that when we focus on freedom in another realm than acting upon one’s existing preferences, we open up for oppression, simply by the fact that we can now say that depriving people of their freedom of action is not in fact a problem at all, since it is not a deprivation of their relevant freedom.

We can also see this concern in Berlin’s discussion of ‘the retreat to the inner citadel’. When faced with minimal freedom of action, Berlin claims, believers in positive freedom “have fled the world, and escaped the yoke of society or public opinion, by some process of deliberate self-transformation that enables them to care no longer for any of its values, to remain, isolated and independent, on its edges, no longer vulnerable to its weapons” (p.399). Berlin believes this is not only absurd but risky, since focusing on freedom in the mind rather than in actions opens up for disrespecting people’s actual preferences on the grounds that these were not formed freely in the first place (p.401). In other words, if negative liberty is partly defined by its focus on freedom of action, and positive liberty by its focus on the process that precedes action, those who support the latter always run the risk of neglecting the former. 47

46 This in fact also resonates with Christman 1991, p.346, although he does not link this to the dangerous aspect of positive liberty.

Also, the latter distinction is reminiscent of William Connolly’s suggestion that we distinguish between two forms of freedom: one that operates on the level of an agent’s “ability to conceive and to choose reflectively among alternatives”, and another that operates on the agent’s “actual and potential actions, limiting his ability to act upon his choices”. Although Connolly prefers to speak of this distinction in terms of different constraints, I believe that if we follow MacCallum, the heart of the matter really is that threats may be directed at two rather different areas or levels of an agent’s choice: either her capacity to think through different alternatives, or her actual possibilities to act upon her final decision, however this was reached, William E. Connolly, The Terms of Political Discourse (Oxford: Robertson, 1983), .

47 Again, my reading contrasts with that of John Christman. Christman claims that Berlin exaggerates the problem at the heart of the retreat to the inner citadel. According to Christman, Berlin’s critique of positive liberty can be avoided avoid as long as we take seriously the possibility that people may change their character and thus no longer be restricted by chains or locks. In contrast, I believe that Berlin’s argument can resist this objection, since what Berlin claims is in fact not that changing one’s preferences due to certain circumstances cannot count as freedom, but that independently of whether it does, focusing on freedom in the process of preference formation is always risky. It is risky, quite simply, because it may invite the following line of reasoning: ‘it may be
Finally, we again see that Berlin is suggesting something more general than that reason and rationality are dangerous per se. What I have argued in this section is that his point is rather that as soon as we do not primarily focus on whether or not I actually have freedom of action, but instead on whether the rules that restrict my freedom of action are arrived at by a process of free preference, or will, formation – then we open up for the inversion of liberty. This mistake, he clearly believes, was committed not only by Kant, but also by less unequivocally Enlightenment-oriented thinkers, such as Rousseau, Herder, Hegel, and Marx; of which the latter three believed, as Berlin says, that “to understand the world is to be freed” (p.400, 402).

What Berlin seems to be saying here is then that if we focus on freedom in our minds, then we are simply likely to be too lenient towards instances of unfreedom in our actions – in other words, we are left with no commitment to fight paternalism. We may be mislead to think that the very acts of forbidding X to engage in certain practices and forcing her to do others has little to do with her freedom, or even, in the extreme case, that these are indeed acts of freedom, as long as they promote a process of free preference formation.

**Some preliminary conclusions**

My triadic reconstruction of Berlin seems to boil down to a two by two matrix with four theoretically possible combinations on two of MacCallum’s variables, as illustrated in Figure 1. On the horizontal axis, we see two different stands on the constraint variable. In other words, we are here dealing with two different answers to the question: “From whom should the individual strive to liberate him/herself?”. The first answer is “from obstacles that are perceived of as internal to his/her own self”; the second answer is “from obstacles that are perceived of as external to his/her self”.

On the vertical axis, we see two different stands on the area variable. Here, we distinguish between two different answers to the question: “What should the individual be free to do?”. The first answer is “to form his or her own preferences”, while the second answer is “to act upon his or her existing preferences”. 48

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true that you are not actually free to act as you please, but what is really important is that you form your will freely; and thus, as long as you are able to do that, it does not really matter how many roads we block before you, you are still essentially free’. 398: “this monstrous impersonation, which consists in equating what X would choose if he were something he is not, or at least not yet, with what X actually seeks and chooses, is at the heart of all political theories of self-realization”


48Because both negative and positive freedom take the same value on the “agent variable” (the individual is the relevant agent for both), the figure is two-dimensional, although MacCallum’s concept is originally three-dimensional. Also note that, theoretically at least, these four dimensions are mutually independent, which means that a person might value all of them or none. Of course, my argument here is not that preference formation and acting upon one’s already formed preferences are mutually exclusive in real life (and neither is this Berlin’s argument). Indeed, it is very likely that one can be said to choose one’s preferences while acting upon them. Rather, the point is that, for Berlin, thinking about one’s ends and trying to achieve those ends seem to be two conceptually different activities, and he clearly believes that while some people cherish freedom in one of these realms, they may care much less about freedom in the other. Indeed, as several philosophers have observed, the two may even be in conflict with each other. Hannah Arendt for example sees thinking as the stopping of what one is doing and asking oneself “Why am I doing this?” or “What is the meaning of what we are
This matrix, illustrates, I believe, that the inversion of liberty may, according to Berlin, result from three possible combinations of these variables – not just one, as previous Berlin research has contended.

The up-shot of my reconstruction of Berlin’s inversion thesis is not only a clearer picture of positive liberty, but also of its negative counterpart. First of all, we can now see even more clearly that negative liberty is not just a formal concept, but a certain character ideal in its own right. For proponents of negative liberty, a valuable life involves the freedom of the individual (1) from constraints external to the self (2) to take action in her life. The reason that Berlin does not criticize it, then, is not that he sees it merely as a formal right (on the contrary, much of what he says suggests he in fact sees it very much as a character ideal); but because in its focus on freedom of action and freedom from external constraints it is, at least on Berlin’s view, not particularly vulnerable to the inversion of liberty.

Secondly, defenders of negative liberty tend to have difficulties explaining why this ideal does not only consist of an absence of obstacles, as its name suggests. John Gray, for example, says that negative freedom for Berlin is different from both the “unimpeded motion” it is for Hobbes, and the unobstructed pursuit of one’s desires in terms of which it was conceived by Bentham. But what is it then? Gray’s response that instead, it is “choice of activities or options unimpeded by others” rather begs the question. My triadic reconstruction suggests a way of solving this ambiguity. Negative freedom, it proposes, is not only freedom from, but also freedom to – to act in life. It is therefore more connected than earlier studies have

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49 As has been indeed suggested by Christman and Nelson, but in regards to the constraints variable only. See Christman 2005, p. 83; Nelson 2005, p.?

50 Of course, this is not to say that negative liberty is harmless and that it does not bring along other problems. It only means that it is not treacherous in the sense that positive liberty is, namely in opening up for the very inversion of the liberty it claims to promote.

51 Gray 1996, Isaiah Berlin, p.?
acknowledged to the idea of refusing passivity, standing up where others crouch, of taking action in one’s life (something that Berlin clearly valued). The ultimate hero of negative liberty is thus not only an individual who defies anyone who tries to constrain him, but also a person who is free to do what he wants; to change his surroundings, master the nature around him, get on in life and simply get things done.52 53

Let us now, however, leave aside the issue on how to interpret Berlin, and return to the broader contemporary discussion with which this paper began. In what follows, I shall relate my conclusions from this section to the predominant debate on current inversions of liberty. As we shall see, this exercise gives us reason to question and criticize the predominant and, as I see it, too narrow understanding of the contemporary sources of the inversion of liberty.

IV Threats from the Enlightenment – or Romanticism?

As we saw already in the introduction, numerous contemporary thinkers tend to associate ‘dangerous’ liberty ideals today with the Enlightenment, reason, and autonomy; the latter of which is in this context, and hereinafter, referred to as a ‘character ideal’ that extols self-reflection. 54 Thus, William Galston, who clearly draws on Berlin’s thoughts, suggests that there is an inherent clash within the liberal tradition between two conflicting strands: ‘Enlightenment Liberalism’ and ‘Reformation Liberalism’, a clash that boils down to the struggle between autonomy and diversity. Much like Berlin, Galston sides with negative liberty, or what he calls Reformation liberalism and diversity, which conceptualize freedom as “the simple desire to be left alone” or not to be oppressed. And much like his predecessor, he worries that certain ideals of liberty may open up for what I have called the inversion of liberty: i.e. the notion that by forcing people to do what they say they do not want, or to stop them from doing what they explicitly wish, we are in fact liberating them.

But unlike Berlin, Galston equates the culprit behind such inversions with the character ideal of autonomy. According to him, the main source of liberal intolerance today comes from ideals for which “the examined life is understood as superior to reliance on tradition or faith” (p.525). In other words, for Galston, the ideal of liberty that threatens to overthrow diversity is that of “liberation by reason”, “sustained rational examination of self, others, social practices” (p.521), and “critical reflection” (p.522, p.524).55


53 Finally, on my approach to negative liberty, it should not be contrasted, as it often is, to political freedom. On the contrary, negative liberty is very much a political ideal, as it is concerned with action rather than contemplation, will formation, feeling, or any other internal matter of the soul. Indeed, this suggests a rather unexpected similarity between Berlin and Hannah Arendt: both criticize ideals of liberty that focus on internal enemies as well as processes of the mind, for the very reason that they turn away from the world of actions. Although Arendt’s concept of action is admittedly rather different from how we use the word in ordinary language, which is all I here mean by freedom of action. See Hannah Arendt 1993, Between Past and Future.

54 Or a ‘Millian autonomy’ in Rostboll’s terminology...

Galston is far from alone in equating ideals of freedom that risk oppressing diversity and tolerance with the notion of freedom as autonomy. In an even more radical defense of diversity, Chandran Kukathas also identifies autonomy as the main threat from within the liberal tradition. In a similar vein, Desmond King traces the sources of what he calls ‘repressive liberalism’ to the ideal of autonomy, with its focus on “reasoning powers” and a certain “ability” to plan for one’s future.

Christian Joppke offers a similar diagnosis of the recent turn in a number of Western European countries towards tougher immigration policies that overtly aim at fostering a certain liberal character ideal that immigrants, often Muslims, are perceived to lack. These events, he says, stem not primarily from “a rebirth of nationalism and racism”, but from the Millian liberalism that extols autonomy and limits freedom to “human beings in the maturity of their faculties.” He gives a vivid example from the Netherlands, where an instructional video for so-called ‘integration abroad’ included “pictures of kissing men, rock concerts, and women with naked breasts”.

Finally, Christian Rostboll also claims that it was the character ideal of autonomy that inspired the most arrogant voices of the liberal majority in the Danish debate that followed the recent publication of twelve notorious Muhammad cartoons in a major Danish newspaper. Rostböll notes in passing that “it is interesting to note how well autonomy as a character ideal” served the project of nationalism in this particular case.

Note to self: The head scarf debate should go in here somewhere!

How, then, does this debate square with what I have found to be Berlin’s inversion thesis? In order to examine this, I will now outline each of the three combinations of positive liberty that we can see in Figure 1, showing that Galston and the other aforementioned scholars fail to recognize another, and equally dangerous version of positive liberty, quite apart from Enlightenment liberalism – namely Romantic liberalism.

**Self-expression in preference formation**

The first combination in Figure 1 is the ideal of *internal liberty of preference formation*. The character ideal of autonomy, on for example Galston’s account, can certainly be seen as a good example of this notion. The need to be liberated by reason, to engage in constant self-reflection and to be “in the maturity” of one’s faculties all seem to boil down to the notion that in order to be truly free, we must liberate ourselves from inner obstacles, such as fears and prejudice, in making up our mind about what we want in life. We should not, on this

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57 Among other things, the Danish Muslims were not believed to have “the right relationship to their faith”, Rostboll says. Christian Rostböll, “Autonomy, Respect and Arrogance in the Danish Cartoon Controversy”, *Political Theory*, 37 (2009), 623-648.
view, blindly follow our instincts or our faith, but constantly reflect over and question our own commitments, feelings and thoughts, asking “is this what I really want?”.

However, the ideal of autonomous or reasoned preference formation does not exhaust the alternatives we are faced with by this particular combination of focusing on freedom from internal, rather than external, obstacles; and freedom in preference formation, rather than action. We may just as well imagine someone striving for this kind of freedom because she or he focuses on the very opposite: faith over reason. Or, for that matter, intuition and passion over consistency and reason. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson famously held that to be truly free, we must resist consistency, “the hobgoblin of little minds”; even consistency with what we ourselves have previously thought and felt. In the following, I shall refer to these notions as ideals of self-expression in preference formation.

For defenders of self-expression in preference formation, internal liberty in preference formation means freeing oneself from reason, logic, critical judgment, and instead follow one’s intuition, or faith, in deciding what one truly wants in life. Just as with autonomy, such ideals valorize the constant questioning of our commitments and our views; the crucial difference, however, lies in that for the romantic versions, the questioning must be done by what we may roughly call the heart, and not the head – indeed, it is often our head and reason that are seen as standing in the way of true self-knowledge and thus liberation.

Self-expression in preference formation envisions, just as the character ideal of autonomy, a ‘true’ self enslaved by other parts of the psyche. Thus, in spite of its treacherous ‘softness’, according to Berlin’s framework we should expect it to be just as amenable to paternalism as the notion of which Galston speaks, that stresses the examined life over faith.

Indeed, self-expression in preference formation might “serve the project of nationalism” equally well, if not better, than autonomy, which Rostboll has pointed out as the main culprit behind the arrogance of the liberal majority against the Muslim minority in the Danish cartoon debate. Note that the problem, on both my and Rostboll’s view, is not the publication of these cartoons or the arguments for the right to freedom of press; but the particular line of argument in defense of these cartoons themselves that held that by satire and provocation, these were indeed liberating the Muslim minority in Denmark, because they provoked them to start ‘critically reflecting’ on their faith.

58 Indeed, this seems to me to be one, if not the most, crucial aspect of the ideal of moral autonomy, as it is often conceptualized by political theorists. For example, Jon Elster stresses that autonomy comes down to exercising some kind of control over “the processes whereby your own preferences are formed”. Elster, J. (1983). Sour Grapes, Studies in the Subversion of Rationality. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Gerald Dworkin writes that autonomy means having the “capacity to have second or higher order desires” (for example the desire I may have not to have the desire to eat chocolate cakes), which are desires concerning our first or lower order desires (for example, the immediate desire I may have to eat a particular chocolate cake). Dworkin 1988, The Theory and Practice of Autonomy. A similar view is held by Harry Frankfurt, ref!

Finally, Christman similarly argues that most conceptions of autonomy “stress the capacity for critical self-reflection in the development of value systems and plans of action”, as is indeed evident from various recent definitions of autonomy as “possessing self-governing reflective capacities”, or the “ability of individuals to critically reflect on and choose their own way of life”, to hold a “reflective distance to their faith”, and to engage in “critical self-reflection”. Christman 2005, p.87; 1991 pp.34-7; Macedo from Galston 1995 p.523; Rostboll 2009, p. 626-7, 629.

59 Reference and maybe insert quote?
Rostboll notes that in the Danish debate that followed upon the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in Jyllandsposten, a major Danish newspaper, Muslims were said to not “hold the right relationship to their faith”. He assumes that the ‘right’ relationship to one’s faith implied here is to be self-critical and rational, and thus concludes that the Danish arrogance was a result of the character ideal of autonomy. However, I believe the romantic notion of self-expression may be just as likely, if not more, to undergird many of the most arrogant positions in the Danish cartoon debate, for the following reasons.60

In a recent article, Nomi Maya Stolzenberg argues that the ‘right’ relationship to one’s faith may for many Westerners be the very opposite of what Rostboll assumes it to be. The ideal is rather to believe with one’s heart than with one’s head, Stolzenberg argues; thus, instead of fighting blind faith, the liberal majority extols it. Even though her description may be an exaggeration, and perhaps a more adequate characterization of an American than an all-Western trend, I believe there is something to Stolzenberg’s argument that complicates Rostboll’s diagnosis.

One way to see this is to consider the context in which the Danish debate took place. In highly secular and liberal countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands, the notion of autonomy as liberation by reason does not always fit with the liberty invoked as specific to the national culture. After all, as Joppke has shown, immigrants to the Netherlands are not taught to understand and believe in Kant’s categorical imperative –– they are shown videos of rock concerts, bare-breasted women and homosexuals kissing.61 The divide, then, between the liberal majority and the Muslim minority is thus hardly seen, from either side, as one between Westerners who use their critical reason free from their passions and desires, and immigrants who must be taught to reflect, plan and reason. In fact, in these countries, the very problem is often portrayed in the opposite terms: Muslim minorities are seen as overly rigid and concerned with their duty to their family, as sometimes even siding against autonomy, but, most importantly, always against the romantic ideal of self-expression.62

Perhaps, then, the target for the most arrogant of the cartoon defenders was not so much religious zeal itself, but a way to believe that does not fit with the ultimately “romantic conception of religion as an essentially inward, intimate, psychological experience, an affair of the heart…very similar to desire”, as Stolzenberg puts it (p.202). If this was indeed the case, then, ironically, the defenders of the cartoons may have had more in common in their view of religion with the religious fundamentalists to which they were associating Islam, than with many a traditional moderate Muslim, since the mark of religious fundamentalism is often precisely this: the focus on the need for self-expression, at any cost.63

In any case, I believe there is reason to question the prevalent idea that the Danish and Dutch examples of ‘liberating’ immigrants against their explicit will must be blamed on the

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60 Note to the reader: Bear with me here: the following part in particular is hastily written and still needs much work! Christian F Rostbøll, 'Autonomy, Respect, and Arrogance in the Danish Cartoon Controversy', Political Theory, 37 (2009), 623-648.


62 Insert sources from Rostböll and Joppke etc. Use evidence from Hagevi’s survey 2009.

63 For this analysis of for example Muhammed Atta, see Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma, Columbia, 2004.
character ideal of autonomy, on liberation by reason and rationality. Instead, at least partly, we should trace it to the ideal of self-expression in preferences, which is inherently opposed to reason and rationality.

**Self-realization**

The second combination that follows from my reconstruction of Berlin’s inversion thesis is *internal freedom of action*, number 2 in Figure 1. Again, we can easily imagine this notion in terms of a typical Enlightenment ideal, namely the notion that we must strive for freedom from our desires and passions in our actions, and instead act upon what reason tells us is right. This certainly fits well with the picture of autonomy with which Galston and other aforementioned thinkers provide us.

Again, however, we can also just as well imagine a more romantic than enlightened ideal of internal freedom of action, representing the opposite, namely the ideal that our actions should *not* be driven by our reflections or reason, but by desire and passion. Examples of this latter notion can be found in the work of thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and more recently Charles Taylor, who all celebrate creation and self-expression as true liberty - but only of an authentic kind, and often as the very opposite of abstract reasoning. In the following, I shall refer to this as the ideal of self-realization.

In fact, this notion of self-realization seems very influential not only in the Romantic tradition, but also in contemporary Western culture. Innumerous self-help coaches tell us that life should be lived from within. This often boils down to the idea that we should not act based on our wish to conform, our internalized notions if what we should do, or our fears and neuroses; but instead, we must search deep within ourselves, peel off the layers of inauthentic wishes and unnatural tastes, and act in line with that most true and original part of our identity that corresponds to our ‘true’ self. To a great extent, this ideal also permeates discussion on child rearing and pedagogic. Human beings, we are here told, should not learn to force themselves to study, to master their anger or to be polite because they know they should. Instead, children must be stimulated to learn out of pure curiosity; they must be encouraged to let out their feelings, whether it is anger and affection, without reflecting much over what is socially accepted or reasonable.

It may at first seem counter-intuitive to regard self-realization as an *internal* freedom, and thus open to the Berlinian suspicion that it may invite us to liberate others from themselves. The goal for self-realization, it may seem, is rather to free the agent from external pressure, from what her surrounding dictates, for example from what counts as prestigious in her society. Nonetheless, when we look further into the matter, it seems to me that self-realization is, just as much as autonomy, concerned with fighting obstacles that are seen as internal to the agent. Consider for example the frequent claim that we need to let out our inner child.

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64 Ironically, Berlin seemed very fond of Herder...more on this...See for example Taylor 1989, *Sources of the Self*, and 1991, *The Ethics of Authenticity*; Rousseau 1974, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*; for Herder, insert ref!

65 See for example *Habits of the Heart*. Also see self-help books such as *The Power of Now*, by Deepak Chopra; *The Passion-Test – The Effortless Path to Discovering Your Life Purpose*, by Janet Bray and Chris Attwood. Also see *Talk of Love*, by Ann Swidler.

66 Ref!
Surely, this metaphor, if anything, conjures up an image of imprisonment of our very identity within our own body – precisely that for which Berlin mocks positive liberty. Whether the obstacles to this romantic freedom of action are seen as innate or as having become internalized during our childhood or later, the important point here is that they are nevertheless equated to internal villains, imprisoning the more true and authentic parts of the psyche from within and thereby holding us back in realizing our ‘true’ selves.

If Berlin is right, then, that acknowledging the possibility of internal constraints on my freedom opens up for the disturbing possibility of others liberating me against my explicit will, this means we must be on guard not only against the reason-oriented ideal of internal freedom of action, but also against the more intuition-oriented ideal of self-realization that I have outlined in this section, and that indeed may be more prevalent than the former in our contemporary Western societies.

Returning to the Danish cartoon debate, I would argue that the notion of self-realization played an important role in opening up for the notion that by provoking the Muslim minority, the liberal majority was in fact engaged in an act of liberation. The liberation, however, was not necessarily directed, as Rostboll assumes, towards the Muslim minority. Instead, I suggest, the cartoons were perhaps partly perceived as an act of liberation for the liberal majority; an act of “pushing back self-imposed limits on self-expression”, as one commentator said.67

It is also interesting to note that the artistic freedoms so often invoked in discussions on the Mohammed cartoons, and other satiric art of the same kind, are not essentially linked to reason and autonomy, but to precisely what I here call self-realization; i.e. the notion that we must liberate our true self from our fears or perhaps even internalized conventions, and express it, realize it, even at a very high cost. Perhaps, then, the Danish cartoon debate can partly be understood as a debate about the artistic right of the majority to express their feelings for the Muslim minority, no matter whether these feelings were justified, and independently of what the results would be, but as an exercise of their freedom.68

**Authenticity in preferences**

The third combination in Figure 1 consists of external freedom of preference formation. Again, the character ideal of autonomy targeted by Galston certainly fits with this picture: it is the ideal of liberating myself from others in making up my mind, of thinking for myself, of consciously choosing my own ideals and not those of others. This is also the ideal that Immanuel Kant defended in *What is Enlightenment?*. However, also this Enlightenment version fails to provide us with the full story. The notion of external freedom of preference formation does not necessarily need to coincide with a commitment to reason and universalism, as it did for Kant. In the work of Herder, for example, I suggest we see a much more romantic version of the same combination; one that is hostile to the Enlightenment ideal of unity and universality. Human beings, Herder held, get their value not from being essentially the same but rather from being radically different from each other. We are unique because we all have different tastes and opinions; and therefore,

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67 Rostboll p.631?
68 Insert more examples here.
man must “return to himself” and learn “not to think other people’s thoughts”. In the following, I shall refer to this as the ideal of authenticity in preference formation.

The cardinal sin, for those advocating authenticity in preference formation, is not the lack of reason, reflection and critical self-examination - but to let ourselves be guided by others in deciding what we want in the first place. “Imitation”, says Emerson, “is suicide”, much in line with Herder. In a similar vein, Mill announces that a person “whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character”. Rousseau, finally, is also adamant “that each citizen make up his own mind” without any contact whatsoever among themselves. In Discourse on Arts and Sciences as well as Emile, he fervently criticizes the unnatural influence of civilization upon our senses, and complains that because of it, our “minds seem to have been cast in the same mold”. Fashion, he says, “stifles taste”; hence “the multitude no longer has judgment of its own”. Accordingly, we must always strive to liberate ourselves from political correctness, tradition, moral codes, public opinion and the prevailing cultural consensus.

Indeed, Rousseau also provides us with a good example of what it is that, perhaps rather unexpectedly, opens up even this radically individualistic version of authenticity in preferences to the inversion of liberty. For, as Hannah Arendt notes, his candid support for authenticity did not stop him from caring very little for negative freedom. Indeed, I would add that his commitment to authenticity in preferences in fact was one of the reasons why he also defended a rather elitist view of human beings. It seems that for Rousseau, the very reason it was sometimes perfectly justifiable to coerce human beings was exactly the observation that their preferences were not authentic, and thus, they were not worthy of equal moral respect.

In order to see this in practice, let us finally return to the French argument that by banning religious symbols, including head scarves, from public schools, the state would in fact be liberating the Muslim minority of women who wanted to wear such head scarves. The troubling part of this argument was precisely this: that these women were not seen as worthy of equal moral respect for their choices to begin with, because their preferences were thought to be superficial, in a sense. The assumption seems to have been, at least partly, that once they would not be able to engage in what they thought they wanted, i.e. wear head scarves, these women would come to realize that this wish was never theirs in the first place, but a preference they had adopted from their environment.

This, I believe, sounds much like the Herderian ideal of “thinking one’s own thoughts”. Just as in the Dutch and Danish cases, the French case reveals an ideal of liberty that did not necessarily extol reason, reflection and critical reasoning abilities. After all, if the goal was to cultivate a capacity for self-critical reflection, it would have seemed more appropriate to

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69 See for example Berlin 2000, Three Critics of the Enlightenment; insert Herder ref!
70 He was clearly concerned with imitation in thoughts, as well as in actions. Emerson 1983, “Self-Reliance” in Essays and Lectures.
72 This was also noted by Hannah Arendt in Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), Also see Jean Jacques Rousseau and the Sources of the Self by John Hope Manson (red.).
73 Jennings, BJPS. Stasi commission report.
recommend education or seminars on the head scarf matter, than to ban the very practice itself. Instead, I suggest that at least partly, the ideal involved in this decision was rather the romantic notion of the need for each individual to be free from the influence of others in deciding what to believe in. If this reading of the French headscarf debate is correct, then this shows that despite of its treacherous individualism, this ideal may sometimes open up for the state to ‘liberate’ persons from their group, even against their explicit will. Just as Berlin argues, the reason for this is that focusing on freedom in preference formation allows us to say that what we are really doing when banning or enforcing a certain action is not to deprive people of freedom, but to liberate them – without worrying much about respecting them, since they are not yet fully developed, authentic, individuals.

**V Conclusions (a very sketchy version)**

This paper has reconstructed Berlin’s argument against the psychological dangers with positive liberty through MacCallum’s triadic framework. This resulted in a more precise typology of four instead of two liberty ideals, and a specification of three ideals of liberty that according to Berlin’s logic are all vulnerable to the inversion of liberty.

As I showed here above, my triadic reconstruction of Berlin’s inversion thesis further suggests that the predominant accounts of risky liberty as synonymous to reason- and Enlightenment-oriented autonomy fail to capture the full range of ideals that may open up for the inversion of liberty. We must not only be on guard against reason-oriented versions of positive liberty, but just as much against their romantic and more intuition-oriented alternatives. The romantic ideal turns the tables on Enlightenment autonomy, arguing that it is reason and reflection that must be fought on behalf of our ‘true’, not lower, but more genuine, selves. In essence, however, these romantic ideals rely just as much as autonomy as liberation by reason on the notion that one part of the self (in this case the intuitive and passionate self rather than the enlightened and reasonable one) should take control over and assert its power over other parts of the self. It may thus very well be that the liberal tendency, of which Galston and others complain, to disrespect religious minorities in largely secular societies, does not in fact stem from idealizing the rule of reason over desire; but rather the romantic liberties of self-expression, self-realization, and authenticity, of living from within, unhindered by internalized convention, duties or commitment.
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