

Answer to Question #2: Mill-Definition-Trap

To identify and understand the argument from the given quote of Berlin¹, I have two complementary approaches. The first approach will be my proposed construction of the argument laid out in the said quote. The second, and most interesting and amusing part, will be some sort of thought experiment (if such a term is appropriate) designed to augment the understanding of the proposed structure of the argument and to distinguish the two concepts of freedom—which is the main subject of the argument in the quote (in fact, of the whole article).

Here is the proposed structure of the argument:

P1: (Definition by Mill) Negative Liberty as the ability to do what one wishes (Berlin, 186); ‘The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way’ (Berlin, 174)

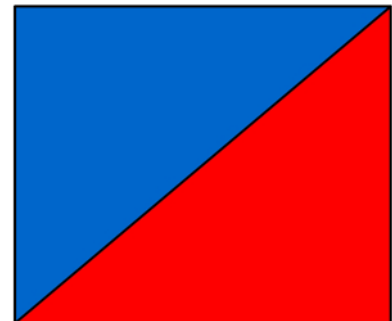
P2: Emphasis of Negative freedom is not with being the source of control but rather on the area of interference². (from Discussion Group)

P3: One can condition the mind to ‘extinguish’ one’s wishes. Also, others can influence oneself into ‘extinguishing’ these wishes. One’s wishes can be altered to accommodate external and internal³ incapacities through self-abnegation and self-realisation. In other words, one conditions the mind that “what I cannot be sure of [I cannot get], I cannot truly want [I do not want].” (Berlin, 186); maintenance of being source of control is emphasized in Positive Freedom (from Discussion Group)

C: Negative Freedom emphasizes and not emphasizes source of control. (Contradiction)

From the contradicting conclusion, we infer Berlin as saying that Mill’s definition of Negative Liberty is inappropriate because, if infused with concepts relating to Positive Freedom, namely, self-abnegation and self-realisation (devices which I think, facilitates a modification or alteration of one’s wishes), this concept of Negative Liberty seems to veer away from the concern of the area of interference (to what extent is the area of control or interference?), which is the main characteristic and differentiating factor of Negative Liberty, into an emphasis on the source of control (who is the source of control?)—Positive Liberty.

To illustrate the difference between Negative and Positive Freedom and to see why Mill’s definition is the “very antithesis of political freedom” (Berlin, 186), let us go through a short experiment. Imagine that the world is a square and that people are triangles. The area bounded by the sides of each triangle corresponds to the ‘amount’ of freedom that each



Square 1

¹ Refer to Berlin, 186.

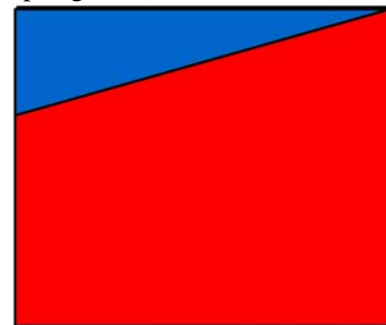
² I shall use “interference” instead of “control” to avoid any ambiguities.

³ Though the given definition of coercion implies external interference, the discussion regarding self-abnegation allows for internal incapacity to pursue one’s wishes.

respective triangle (person) has. Assume that I am the triangle that encloses the blue region and that the rest of the world is symbolized by the polygon⁴ with the red region. Also, for our experiment, let us consider this constraint: I can only consider myself as the source of this bounded region (freedom) if the bounds remain to form a triangle. In other words, I must maintain my shape in order to maintain the blue region. Furthermore, assume that I have only two wishes: to study, and to marry this Chinese girl. If there are no interferences on my two wishes, my total freedom corresponds to the area of the blue region in Square 1 (minimum acceptable freedom I wish to receive from the world given my 2 wishes).

What if suddenly the world dictates that interracial marriage is a taboo? Given this condition, there seems to be an interference in my freedom, specifically on my second wish (to marry a Chinese girl; because I am not Chinese). To avoid conflict and to maintain my shape (“I” as the source of control), it is suggested that either I convince myself that Chinese girls are not worth it compared to women of my race, or that I rationalise this taboo (e.g. this is a taboo because it is for the survival of my pure race, this is a taboo because interracial marriages cause a defect in the genetic structure of our offspring, etc.). In both cases, I

distorted my second wish and conditioned my mind into thinking that I do not want to marry this Chinese girl. But don’t I really want to marry this Chinese girl? I do, thus this manifests as a contraction of the blue region, as seen in Square 2. As we can see from Square 2, I am still the source of control of my freedom. However, the area of interference (the red region) definitely increased, leaving me a smaller



Square 2

area of freedom (which is, compared to Square 1, less than the minimum that I originally wanted). According to Berlin, “Political liberty in this sense [Negative Freedom] is simply the area within a man can act unobstructed by others.” (Berlin, 169) The “area within” I “can act unobstructed by others” seem to have changed from the original Square 1 (which is the blue region that I really want) to the smaller blue region of Square 2. Therefore, applying Mill’s definition of Negative Freedom (and using the techniques associated with Positive Freedom to “extinguish” wishes and maintain status as the source of control) restricts, contracts, distorts, and destroys my Political Liberty—an antithesis—instead of upholding it. Considering an extreme case of suicide (Berlin, 187), it is quite absurd to think that I am free even if the notion of Positive Freedom is adopted⁵. This extreme case is an unfortunate

⁴ Not necessarily a triangle as we will see later, but can be subdivided into triangles to signify partition to other members of the “rest of the world”; for simplicity, let us assume in our experiment that there are only two players: “I” and the “rest of the world.”

⁵ Who enjoys this apparent Positive Freedom when I am dead? Suicide: “Total liberation in this sense [Positive Freedom combined with self-abnegation] is conferred only by death.” (Berlin, 187)

possibility if one accepts Mill's definition of Negative Freedom, thus I coin: The Mill-Definition-Trap.