On October 31, 1958, Isaiah Berlin gave his inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford. Entitled "Two Concepts of Liberty," it was, according to Michael Ignatieff, Berlin's authorized biographer, "the most influential lecture he ever delivered." Indeed, one can argue that Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" was one of the most important political essays of the twentieth century, for it clarified an important element in the prolonged contest between the imperfect democracies of the West and the pluperfect tyranny of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Berlin's essay defended the liberal democratic project in such a way as to reinforce the liberal anti-Communist consensus that historians still associate with men such as President Harry Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and Senators Hubert H. Humphrey and Henry M. Jackson. As things turned out, that consensus held just long enough to ensure that, deepened intellectually and reinforced politically by conservative and neoconservative thinkers and political leaders in the 1970s and 1980s, freedom's cause won out over Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism.

A wide-ranging historian of ideas who had grown up in Riga and Petrograd, Isaiah Berlin had seen firsthand the human and political effects of passionately held ideas. Berlin knew in his bones that ideas are not intellectuals' toys: ideas have consequences, for good and for ill, in what even intellectuals sometimes call "the real world." In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin mounted an extended defense of what he understood to be the liberal idea of freedom against its principal modern political competitors, fascism and communism. At the same time, he raised an alarm against what he regarded as the tendency in social democratic theory to weaken individual freedom in the name of other social goods. As the title of his lecture signals, Berlin's basic intellectual move was to distinguish between "negative liberty" and "positive liberty," and then to defend the former as the only concept of liberty that could be actualized in the "real world" of inevitably conflicting interests, diverse concepts of the good, and competing human projects.

"Negative liberty" for Berlin is freedom from: freedom from interference in personal matters, which implies the circumscription of state power within a strong legal framework. As Ignatieff summarizes Berlin's argument, the primary purpose of a liberal political community is to create the public circumstances in which men and women are left alone "to do what they want, provided that their actions [do] not interfere with the liberty of others." "Positive liberty," on the other hand, is freedom to: freedom to realize some greater good in history. At the heart of the Fascist and Communist projects, Berlin warned, was a determination to use political power to liberate human beings, whether they liked it or not, for the realization of some higher historical end. That determination, Berlin argued, inevitably leads to repression.

Isaiah Berlin was not a libertarian. Rather, the man who had first worked at the intersection of ideas and power during his World War II...
Two Concepts of Freedom. By Charlie Gilkey on July 28, 2013 3 Comments. Editor’s note: I recorded this as a podcast long after I originally published this post. I hope you enjoy it, and if you’d like to hear more episodes of the Productive Flourishing podcast, you’ll find them in the show’s archives. Have you ever made a choice to increase your freedom only to figure out that you were no happier after you had it? Or have you ever found that you’ve been the most happy in the times in which you were least free? If so, you’ve experienced the reality of there being two kinds of freedom. A better question than “how can I be more free?” is “what conditions enable me to thrive, and what do I need to do to get them in place?” (Tweet this) Let’s pick up that question another day. 😊 Related Posts. Two concepts of freedom. Introduction. ‘Freedom’ can mean many different things. Here we’re concerned with political freedom. Isaiah Berlin distinguished between a concept of negative freedom and a concept of positive freedom. You will examine these concepts and learn to recognise the difference between freedom from constraint and the freedom that comes from self-mastery or self-realisation. The following material is taken from the book Arguments for Freedom ‘1999’ authored by Nigel Warburton of The Open University. This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Huma The Islamic concept of freedom is a controversial issue on the level of intellectuals and clergy of different religions world-wide. So many people, particularly in the democratic countries argue that Islam establishes authoritarian social and political systems, and allows very little space for freedom of individuals and groups. There are very gloomy conclusions drawn about Islam from the side of western mass media, intellectuals and ordinary people. Qardawi who is very well known in the Islamic world is just an example. (Qardawi, p. 14) He always calls for enforcing human reasoning in understanding the texts, and calls for open mindedness on all issues. Back to freedom of choice, the Quran states: “By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it. Two Concepts of Freedom. Political cartoon depicting a "European Anarchist" attempting to destroy the Statue of Liberty. The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin made a distinction between positive liberty and negative liberty in his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty." He defined negative liberty as the absence of constraints on, or interference with, an agent's possible action. The former is responsible and expected to issue in a good result for oneself and others, while the latter is irresponsible and selfish, not being able to contribute anything constructive to society. If the social contract contains some universal values, then positive freedom mentioned above may be similar to this responsible type of freedom. There is an even more internalized type of freedom.