The Idea of Negative Liberty: 
Machiavellian and Modern Perspectives

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Summary

(1) Since Isaiah Berlin proposed his famous distinction between “negative liberty” and “positive liberty,” his definition of the two concepts of liberty had been widely accepted among the Anglophone philosophers. According to Berlin, the idea of negative liberty means “absence of interference.” The reason why it must be defended is that it provides individuals with opportunity to pursue their own good and their own way (Berlin, 2002: 174). However, Berlin’s thesis of negative liberty was disputed by some proponents, who hold different views of “the nature of the circumstances in which it is proper to say that the freedom of some particular agent has or has not been restricted or infringed (187).” Contemporary theorists of negative liberty have repudiated two contentions about social freedom because both these strands’ ideas were incompatible with the idea that “the enjoyment of social freedom is simply a matter of being unobstructed”. One road is Rousseau’s suggestion, claiming that “personal freedom depends on the performance of public services.” The other is Spinoza’s suggestion, arguing that only the virtue can guarantee the fulfillment of freedom (188). However, according to Berlin, whether Rousseau or Spinoza’s idea of liberty presupposes the idea of self-realization, which may always be responsible for surrendering oneself to the external force such as state, class, or groups. Thus, Berlin completely rejects these strands of thinking about social freedom.

Skinner argues that even in Berlin’s idea, he keeps the room for the “Aristotelian suggestion that we are moral beings with certain true ends and rational purposes”. Thus, Skinner contends that it is reasonable to argue that even when “we act in such a way that those ends and purposes are realized as completely as possible,” it is possible for us to enjoy our liberty completely.

Then, Skinner illustrates two strands rejected by negative theorists to respond to negative camp. Firstly, Taylor contends that human nature can achieve its realization only “within a certain form of society.” Secondly, Gibbs thinks that it is hard to resist the relationship between freedom and virtue. From these citations, Skinner attempts to find the possibility to make the “community” and “virtue” compatible with Berlin’s negative idea of liberty. Following their way of thinking, Skinner argues that, if we
accept that “our liberty depends upon ‘attaining and enjoying those cardinal goods appropriate to our natures,’” virtues would be inevitable for us to perform moral actions. For Skinner, the nature of the debate between negative theorists who hold the ‘opportunity’ concept and the theorists who embraces the ‘exercise’ concept is about “whether to distinguish an objective notion of eudaimonia or human flourishing.” Skinner appeals to the history of political thought to prove the idea of “objective human flourishing” because he believes that there must be the possibility to make negative liberty compatible with virtue. As he points out, the purpose of this article is to show that “in an earlier and now discarded strand of thinking about social freedom, the concept of negative freedom was combined with the idea of virtue and public service in just the manner nowadays assumed to be impossible without incoherence (190).”

(2) Methodologically speaking, Skinner tries “to eschew conceptual analysis and turn instead to history” in this article. The reason is that if we adopt conceptual analysis, “it is easy to see how it comes about that any purely analytical attempt to connect the idea of negative liberty with the ideals of virtue and service is liable to appear unconvincing, and vulnerable to being dismissed out of hand (192).” When it comes to interpreting any text, researchers will always be involved in two lines of approach. One is “to recapture the substance of the argument itself,” and the other is to understand “why its contents are as they are.” The second approach, in advance, always requires completing “the further task of recovering what the writer may have meant by advancing that particular argument.” To attain this goal, it is necessary “to give an account of what they were doing in presenting their argument (194).” Skinner are not satisfied with the orthodox approach to study the history of philosophy because it always ignores the latter task. He appeals to a broader notion of “relevance,” advocating that “the only way to learn from the past, in short, is to appropriate it (195).” We should acknowledge that “our imaginative grasp of historical texts” is limited and still “fight against it with all the weapons that historians have already fashioned in their efforts to reconstruct without anachronism the alien mentalit’es of earlier periods (195).”

(3) In attempts to go beyond the debate on the positive and negative freedom, Skinner tries to investigate the neo-Roman idea of liberty. In the neo-Roman writers such as Niccolo Machiavelli, James Harrington, and Spinoza, Skinner picks up Machiavelli’s work, especially his Discorsi on Livy, as his concentration. Skinner
points out that the most central concerns of Machiavelli is his view of *libertas* (liberty). According to Skinner, Machiavelli defines liberty as “absence of constraint,” “especially absence of any limitation or obstructions imposed by other agents on one’s capacity to act independently in pursuit of one’s chosen goals (198).” What Machiavelli concerns is that “under what type of regime we can most reliably hope to maximise our liberty to attain our chosen ends.” In Machiavelli’s mind, this form of polity must be “one of which it makes sense to say that the community itself is free (198).”

By investigating Machiavelli’s idea of liberty, Skinner cites an essential part of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*: “It is not the pursuit of individual good, but of the common good, that makes cities great, and it is beyond doubt that it is only in republics that this ideal of the common good is properly served, because everything that promotes it is followed out.” As Skinner puts it, Machiavelli’s conclusion is that “if we wish to see the common good fostered, and our individual liberty in consequence upheld, we must make sure that we institute and maintain a system of self-government (199).” Skinner regards Machiavelli as an important contributor to the paradigm of neo-Roman theories of freedom and citizenship. Specifically speaking, Skinner contends that individual liberty must be fulfilled “under a republican regime (199).”

Skinner analyzes what Machiavelli’s remedy for controlling ambition in public life. Because Machiavelli believes that one’s ambition must be harmful to the other, he tries to provide some ways to restrain the fatal consequences which ambition brings about. For Machiavelli, there are two forms of ambition concerning communities which constitutes the threat to a city or a state: from within and from outside. As to ambition from within the community, it “reflects the desire of the *grandi* to achieve power at the expense of their fellow-citizens.” When it comes to ambition from outside, the threat is always from the foreign enemies. Essentially, Skinner contends that “There are, in short, two distinct threats to personal as well as civic liberty arising from the omnipresence of ambitiousness (201).”

In order to defeat “the danger of servitude arising ‘from outside,’” what the member of the community could do is to “follow the method” and to “cultivate the qualities needed for effective defence (201).” Skinner admits Machiavelli doesn’t say that “a city which defends its body with its own arms will thereby guarantee its citizens their liberty.” However, Machiavelli does admonish us that only through citizens’ willingness to defense their own community from foreign threats can they keep their own liberty. What Machiavelli expresses is that to cultivate personal qualities is the best way to defend individual liberty. The qualities concerning defense
include prudence and courage. Prudence implies “practical judgment” while courage means “sheer determination and persistence (202).” Considering how to deal with ambition from within, Machiavelli’s strategy is to establish “the right laws and ordinances.” Although the laws governing the community must reflect its general will, it also means that the great must be “bridled” and “held in check (203).” The qualities concerning enacting laws and ordinances include wisdom and temperance Wisdom means the “practical ability to judge the best courses of action and follow them out” while temperance denote “those qualities that enable a citizen to advise and act in a truly statesmanlike way” and behaving “with orderliness (202).”

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By reconstructing Machiavelli’s idea of liberty, Skinner indicates that for the neo-Roman theorists such as Machiavelli, “the enslavement of a community thus brings with it the inevitable loss of individual liberty” and that “the liberty of particular men…can only be assured under a ‘free commonwealth’, an elective and self-governing form of republican regime (206).”

The core intention of Skinner to reconstruct Machiavelli’s idea of liberty is to respond to contemporary philosophers’ skeptical attitude toward the compatibility of social freedom and negative freedom. Contrary to these philosophers’ position, Skinner recognizes the possibility to pursue individual liberty and a city or a state’s liberty at the same time. The contemporary philosophers challenge the compatibility in two ways, and Skinner responds to them separately.

First of all, Skinner suggests that “freedom is connected with service - that only those who place themselves wholeheartedly at the service of their community are capable of assuring their own liberty (206).” To prevent servitude arising ‘from outside,’ it requires “a readiness to perform one’s military service, to volunteer for active service, to join what we still call the armed services,” because it constitutes “a necessary condition of maintaining one’s own individual freedom from servitude (206).” To prevent “the grandi from coercing the popolo into serving their ends,” it requires “a readiness to serve in public office, to pursue a life of public service, to perform voluntary services,” because it “constitutes a further necessary condition of maintaining one’s own liberty (206).”

The second contention Skinner makes is that “that the attributes required of each individual citizen in order to perform these public services must be the virtues, and thus that only those who behave virtuously are capable of assuring their own freedom (207).” The virtues Machiavelli thinks to be necessary for the preservation of the republic and individual liberty includes: courage, temperance and orderliness, and prudence. Obviously, Machiavelli downplays justice which Cicero gives it
commanding position in *De Officiis*. Skinner argues that Machiavelli in the sense make “an epoch-making break with the classical analysis of the cardinal virtues (208).” However, according to Skinner, “this represents Machiavelli’s sole quarrel with his Roman authorities. The rest of his analysis of virtù and its connections with libertà is impeccably Ciceronian in character (208-209).”

In responding to Federico Chabod’s contention that Machiavelli’s virtù is not a moral quality, Skinner contends that Machiavelli use the term virtù in the widest meaning to describe the human qualities needed to preserve the liberty and to attain civic greatness. For Skinner, Machiavelli indeed breaks with the classical use of cardinal virtues, but he still keeps the classical concern that the best way to keep one’s own liberty and to contribute to the common good is through the cultivation of virtues.

In the concluding remark, Skinner provides two meaning of his this article. Firstly, in attempts to respond to the confusion contemporary debate may make, he claims that it is possible for a theory of liberty which incorporates the idea of social freedom with the elements of virtues and common good to posit certain ends for individuals to pursue without invading their liberty. It seems that Skinner thinks his own theory doesn’t spill over Berlin’s idea of negative liberty. By illustrating his detailed analysis of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*, Skinner confidently believes that road that Machiavelli takes is very different from that of Spinoza and Rousseau. Unlike these theorists who tend to presuppose “a vision of eudaimonia or real human interests,” Machiavelli’s departure is only “an account of the ‘humours’ or dispositions that prompt us to choose and pursue our various ends (210-211).” Secondly, Skinner clearly distinguishes Machiavelli’s duty-based liberty from Hobbes’ rights-based liberty. According to Skinner, Hobbes’ liberty implies equates with individual rights. On the contrary, Machiavelli’s idea of liberty lies in a principle that “the attainment of social freedom cannot be a matter of securing personal rights, since it indispensably requires the performance of social duties (211).” For Skinner, Machiavelli upholds citizens’ duty, requiring every citizen to cultivate their virtues and serve the common good of the community, both for the liberty of their community and their own.

Reference