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Sample Student Essay Example A

Although we have made minor changes for educational purposes, this essay was produced for a second level politics course by Open University student Mr Phil Ellis. We are most grateful for his kind permission to reprint the essay here.

Why is the concept of freedom so contested in political theory?

(Word maximum: 1,500)

Freedom is an important concept in Western politics, strongly entwined as it is with ideas of liberalism. Yet, as suggested by the question, the concept is one which is hotly debated. Indeed, political agents attempt to control the political agenda through promotion of their particular definition. This essay will look at the ways freedom has been defined by different theorists over the years. It will also look at how freedom is linked with and explained through different theories and ideologies. It will then go on to look at how these different theories and ideologies may shape the conceptions of freedom we find in our daily lives.

Different political theorists, writing in different times, often of political turmoil, have considered freedom in many different ways. Three influential writers who took a normative approach were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. An important part of their arguments turned on their notions of a 'state of nature' – where natural law applied in absence of any organised political state.

Hobbes (1651, cited in Brown, 2005), writing shortly after the English Civil War, argued that in a 'state of nature' individuals would be fearful for their own interests, resulting inevitably in war of all against all. To obviate this,

Hobbes suggested that individuals should voluntarily accept restrictions – and invest their will in an absolute power (the monarchy) to make collective decisions for all. This restriction of individual freedoms would provide all with freedom from war.

John Locke (1689, cited in Brown, 2005), writing shortly afterwards at a time during which many feared that King Charles II would indeed become an absolutist monarch, believed that a ‘state of nature’ would be a place of religion and morals where individuals had natural rights to property and life. They would surrender some rights to a state that would provide protection for some others. They would thus be free to enjoy their natural rights.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762, cited in Brown, 2005) considered that freedom in the ‘state of nature’ was inferior to that which could be obtained in political society. Participation in the setting of rules for society and then obedience to them would bring a more complete freedom.

Prudential theorists, however, like David Hume and Jeremy Bentham, rejected the concept of a ‘social contract’, arguing that there was no moral or other duty to obey and neither was there a ‘natural’ right to property (Brown, 2005). Rather, it was in people’s interests to live in a society which could make and enforce laws. However, the constructivist theorist Michel Foucault (1980, cited in Brown, 2005) saw at least freedom *from* power as something entirely more elusive. He viewed control and self-control as being all-pervasive in society and thought that those who struggled to be free of it did not understand its nature.

But it is not just that freedom is a contested definition amongst political theorists; it is also a concept that is contested through its use and association with other theories and ideologies. Broadly speaking, freedom can be considered in two different ways – positive freedom and negative freedom (Smith, 2005). Positive freedom is often thought of as ‘freedom to’; in other words a society and political system which enables individuals to do the things and live the way they want. In contrast, negative freedom can be considered ‘freedom from’, in terms of absence of restrictions on individual behaviour. The idea of negative freedom has been criticised as it does not take into account the difference in circumstances between individuals. One may be free to take a cruise in the sense that it is open to all, but only people who can afford it can be considered to have a real choice and thus freedom. Through such arguments is the concept of equality linked with freedom. If equality of an outcome is sought, then arguably the freedom of some of the best and brightest people in society must be curtailed in order to achieve uniformity; to give freedom to the disadvantaged, it must be taken from others. This approach may be considered stifling of both innovation and effort, since anything above the average will not be rewarded. By contrast, if equality of *opportunity* is achieved, then some will accumulate more wealth and power than others, giving them effectively more freedom.

John Rawls (1971, cited in Middleton, 2005) introduced two principles of justice, the first of which was that ‘each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others’. Rawls attempted to address the question of inequality through the second of his principles: the ‘difference principle’. In this he said that it was acceptable for some to be better off than others as long as by doing so the poorest people also benefitted in some way. In other words, inequality was acceptable if some of the extra benefit were redistributed to those most in need. This approach is an example of positive freedom. However, Isaiah Berlin (1969, cited in Smith, 2005), known as a chief architect of theories of positive and negative freedom, saw dangers in this approach too. He argued that it was wrong to ascribe to individuals a set of common needs and desires. Moreover, he considered that the surrender of individual freedom for collective self-rule could result in individual rights being violated. He concluded that a measure of both positive and negative freedom was desirable for good society.

Marxists would perhaps argue that the poorest would benefit most if the owners of the means of production were not the bourgeoisie but the workers themselves. Moreover, Robert Nozick (1974, cited in Middleton, 2005) considers that the state which would be required under Rawls’s difference principle would be too big and would itself undermine people’s freedom. Nozick argues that people should be free to keep what is theirs; the state should not be allowed to redistribute wealth. However, Nozick’s approach, based on negative freedom, could be criticised in terms of whether it would bring real freedom to the disadvantaged.

As a practical example of how a certain concept of freedom has been used with a contemporary ideology, Margaret Thatcher managed to change perceptions in people’s mind about the benefits of a benevolent state, such as state intervention and collectivism (Smith, 2005). She reframed the debate as one about the freedom from an all-intrusive state. So successful was she that (New) Labour felt forced to reconsider its ideologies and adopt many similar messages about giving people choice.

An examination of the right to self-determination shows how these contested issues can influence arguments. A fundamental question is: under what circumstances does a group have the right to secede from a state, exercising a right to self-determination? Most democratic theorists would argue that the majority should decide, but that raises questions of its own, such as: the majority of whom? – the people in the area claiming the right to secede? or all the people in the state which will be affected? In addition, what majority is required? Furthermore, would secession bring similar such rights to other communities to exercise too (Saward, 2005)? To take an argument of positive freedom to its extreme conclusion would be to allow everyone the freedom to secede and form their own private state, a solution that is unworkable

in practice. Robert A. Dahl (cited in Saward, 2005) notes that this extreme form of democracy – the one-person state – ‘would be absurd’. However, those who advocate the benefits of negative freedom would wish to protect the freedom of people from interference; they would require that a ‘super-majority’ was necessary to pass any vote in favour of secession.

Another example in which we can see the interplay of these contested ideas in different ideologies is around the subject of dissent. Liberals might consider that freedom of speech and expression is paramount (positive freedom), whereas conservatives might consider that freedom from abuse and bad social order is more important (negative freedom) (Andrews, 2005). Hobbes would align himself with the second of these positions, whilst Locke would be positioned with the first. John Stuart Mill (1985, cited in Andrews, 2005) thought that people knew their own minds best and it was not for the state to interfere. However, he did not advocate complete freedom, saying that power should only be exercised on another person against his will in order to prevent harm to others.

The concept of freedom is so fiercely contested in political theory in the West because it is one of the core tenets of democracy and is at the heart of so many other key debates such as those about justice, rights and responsibilities. But not only does freedom admit of many different definitions but it can also be tied with theories and ideologies to make powerful arguments. Consequently, these debates do not just begin and end with political theorists. Rather politicians, leaders and others use them every day, conscious of the theory or not, to influence decisions and the choices people make.

(Word count: 1496)

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