The Review of Politics 77 (2015), 279–284.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670515000078

SCHOLARLY EXCHANGE

REPLY TO CROWDER

A perceptive critic is always the best possible aid in sharpening our arguments. I am thus most grateful to George Crowder for raising what I take to be three central objections to my reconstruction of the psychological undercurrent in Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty," that is, the cognitively tempting but not always logical steps by which positive liberty risks blinding us to our own coercion.

Why Personal Autonomy Is Not Immune to Inversion

Crowder remains unconvinced by my conclusion that *all* ideals of positive liberty invite the inversion of liberty, an implication that I should indeed have spelled out more carefully in my essay. Even on the psychological as opposed to logical understanding of the steps by which this takes place, Crowder insists that this process only applies to what he calls the "authoritarian" version of positive freedom. Positive liberty in "the form of 'personal autonomy,' which involves a process of critical self-reflection that is open-ended and strictly internal to the person," by contrast, does not allow for any "external authority's knowing what is authentic to the person better than the person herself. Further, there is no possibility of the person's being forced to be free, since freedom in this view can be achieved only through the agent's self-reflection." How, then, he asks, "would a person be tempted to accept coercion as the liberation of her real self when her real self is just what she makes of it?"

I fully agree that the open-ended ideal of autonomy does indeed steer clear of assuming the existence of what Crowder refers to as "a single, objective real self as in Rousseau." What he overlooks, however, is that one of my main points by revisiting positive liberty through Gerald MacCallum's triadic concept of freedom is to show that Berlin was troubled by how champions of positive liberty define not only the self that should be free, nor the obstacles from which it should be liberated, but also the activity in which freedom matters the most. Berlin, I argue, believed that there was a lurking danger

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the very idea that freedom is exercised not in the external world of actions, but in the internal process of will formation (283–86).[11]

But if freedom is to master one's will, surely this must render impossible the conclusion that coercion could ever liberate, since the very point with this ideal is that no one else can do it for me? I think not. While I certainly agree that champions of this ideal could hardly equate coercion to liberty, as I note in my essay, this does not hinder them from concluding that coercion may at times be the only way to get the process of internal self-reflection going in the first place. Coercion might thus still be framed as "an empirically necessary (albeit insufficient) step in the larger project of liberation" for those that are considered in their present state to be "singularly deaf" to the voice of reason (285).

To see how this can happen, imagine a champion of the open-ended ideal of personal autonomy, who firmly believes that another person, X, has capitulated her own judgment to that of a tight-knit group, or a religious authority. If our champion of personal autonomy is convinced that X will indeed never question this group or authority in her present state, then he might now conclude that the only way to achieve her liberty in the realm of preference formation is to forcefully distance X from this source of influence, so that she eventually becomes able to think for herself again. If X objects that this is in fact to coerce rather than to liberate her, our champion of positive liberty might now dismiss her by saying that, surely, we need not listen to what X believes about herself in her current state, for it lies in the nature of the matter that she will only later be able to know what she really wants. At present, she is simply not an authority regarding her own preferences.

Of course, if we have good reasons to believe that X is indeed brainwashed, then this might appear a sound view of liberation, and not at all a perversion of liberty. We might for example think of religious sects that are known to condition, manipulate, or even drug their members, thus making it impossible for them to use their own judgment to question any of their leaders. I should perhaps have brought up such examples in my original essay. The reason I did not, however, is that my main interest here is not with cases where we do indeed know that a person cannot disentangle her own self from that of a group or authority, but with cases where we have no reason to assume this but nevertheless do so. This is where self-righteous monism and the French debate on full veils come into the picture.

Self-Righteous Monism and the Veil Ban

Although I admit that this could have been clearer in my essay, my point in citing the psychological literature on naïve realism and epistemic egocentrism

[11]Unless otherwise stated, all page references in the following refer to my original essay.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was to suggest that, even in cases where we have no grounds for assuming that a person is so brainwashed or weak willed as to necessitate coercive liberation, we are sometimes likely to assume this nonetheless—for the simple reason that we have a hard time imagining that others could wish for things we could never imagine wishing for ourselves. The psychological literature tells us that we often seem to assume that the reason another person pursues a goal we do not share at all must be that there is something wrong with their reasoning powers to begin with (279–80).

I have referred to this assumption as self-righteous monism. Crowder raises several valid concerns regarding my treatment of this notion, which I admittedly use somewhat sweepingly. A more accurate label might be self-righteousness as such, or a lack of moral imagination. Independently of what we call this, however, I think the gist of my argument remains relevant. For even though it is true in theory that we cannot tell the quality of a person's internal process of preference formation from the mere content of her preferences, the psychological literature that I refer to in my essay suggests that in reality, we often seem to forget this. When people express preferences that we are convinced we could never hold, we are on the contrary quick to take this alone as proof that they are too biased, irrational, or intellectually lazy to be reasoned with in their present state. In other words, we assume that they are what Berlin calls "singularly deaf" to the voice of reason—and this, I suggest, may happen not only on the so-called externalist account of reason, but also for those who see reason as a matter of internal consistency between the beliefs and desires of the person at hand. For example, as Anna Elisabetta Galeotti has recently noted, the fact that "lack-of-autonomy judgments can rarely be drawn with confidence" does not seem to have hindered critics of the Muslim veil to draw such judgments nevertheless, in a biased way, moreover, by questioning the autonomy of veiled women, but not of those in the majority culture who engage in piercing, plastic surgery, extreme dieting, or other similar practices despite their more irreversible nature.[12]

As I should admittedly have made clearer in my original essay, the full veil specifically is not worn by children to school, but by adults in the public space, a great number of whom, furthermore, are known to don this garment voluntarily; many are indeed converts to Islam, who cannot be presumed to have been conditioned into this practice from early years.[13] Yet,

[12]Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, "Autonomy and Cultural Practices: The Risk of Double Standards," *European Journal of Political Theory* (published online 7 September 2014): 2, 14–15.

[13]André Gerin and Éric Raoult, Document no. 2262, *Rapport d'information au nom de la mission d'information sur la pratique du port du voile intégral sur le territoire national*, Assemblée Nationale, 29 January 2010, 46–48 and 93. For an overview of previous research on motives behind full veils, see Faegheh Shirazi and Smeeta Mishra, "Young Muslim Women on the Face Veil (Niqab): A Tool of Resistance in Europe but Rejected in the United States," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (2010): 43–62.

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without presenting any evidence that these women are indeed brainwashed or for other reasons unable to know what they want—indeed, while explicitly urging us *not* to investigate their "subjective motivations" for veiling—ban defenders such as philosopher Adbennour Bidar assume that the wish to don a full veil must stem from the internalization of an external pressure, to which the women have by now become defenseless victims. At the same time, the liberty that is taken to justify the ban on veiling seems to be the very ideal that according to Crowder should be immune to the inversion of liberty, because it is philosophically incompatible with monism, i.e., personal autonomy in the sense of mastering one's own preference formation. Bidar's reasoning shows that, in reality, this ideal does not preclude but may in fact invite the conclusion that to force women to remove their veils against their explicit wishes is in fact a part of their liberation. Since a veil ban supposedly provides veiled women with the distance from the group that they are currently presumed to lack, but that they are held to need in order to exercise their own judgment, and since it supposedly lies in the nature of their present state that they will never achieve this distance on their own, coercion becomes equated to the very starting point of their liberation (287–88).

This also illustrates why the debate on full veils is indeed a case of liberal and not just republican ideals distorted into repression. As I have elaborated elsewhere, the republican perspective is of course relevant, but fails to capture something important in this specific debate.[14] For while not only the aforementioned Bidar, but also former president Nicolas Sarkozy, and the Information Commission that recommended the "burqa ban" to the National Assembly, suggest that the "headscarf ban" in schools was indeed a matter of safeguarding republican values of unity and secularism, they explicitly argue that the full veil ban, by contrast, is justified by more individualistic concerns over personal liberty.[15]

Berlin's Contemporary Relevance

None of this, finally, implies that we should condemn positive liberty itself, but only its potential empirical consequence: the renaming of coercion as mere liberation. When Crowder notes that "the exiling from public discourse of positive liberty as personal autonomy" would be a "disservice to liberal thought," I cannot but wholeheartedly concur. To nevertheless warn

[14]Gina Gustavsson, "A Romantic Reading of the French 'Burqa Ban': Liberty as Self-Expression and the Symbolism of Uncovered Faces in the French Debate on Full Veils," *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies* 2 (forthcoming in March 2015).

[15]A. Chrisafis, "Nicolas Sarkozy Says Islamic Veils Are not Welcome in France," *The Guardian*, 22 June 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/22/islamic-veils-sarkozy-speech-france; Gerin and Raoult, Document no. 2262, 87.

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against the risks with positive liberty is no more strange than to rejoice in electricity and remind oneself and others that live candles always bring the risk of a fire, while refraining from purging one's cupboards from candles, and nevertheless enjoying candle-lit dinners on a dark winter's night.

But if I do indeed agree that positive liberty is a valuable liberal ideal, then this, Crowder suggests, raises the question of what my central thesis really *is*. In order to dispel any remaining confusion, let me therefore restate that my main thesis is that there is a neglected psychological undercurrent in Berlin's warnings against positive liberty which is particularly relevant for us today, because it helps us understand contemporary cases of repressive liberalism, such as the recent banning of the full Muslim veil in France.

Crowder's critique is helpful, however, in that it reveals that there is an ambiguity in my claim that Berlin helps us understand contemporary debates. Crowder seems to assume that understanding here means normative evaluation, such as reaching the best answer regarding whether or not to ban veils. This, however, was never my intention. In my view, Berlin provides us with an *empirical* theory about the psychological steps by which certain ideals of liberty are likely to end up leading their supporters to defend coercion under the cloak of liberation. By looking at contemporary debates through his framework, we can thus better perceive, categorize, describe, and explain the arguments and values that different voices invoke, and that have, as a matter of fact, led to certain political conclusions—better, that is, than previous empirical research.

For example, previous interpretations of the French veil ban that use the perspective of repressive liberalism conclude that the self-professedly liberal proponents of the ban use liberty as a mere rhetorical cover-up for authoritarian concerns over order and security (289n101). Others object that the ban springs from a sincere attempt to combat ostentatious self-expression for the sake of republican ideals, such as unity and a difference-blind public sphere.[16] Approaching this discourse through Berlin's eyes, however, reveals that individual liberty—of the positive kind—plays a much more crucial empirical role in this debate than either of these perspectives recognize. Much antagonism against the veil seems rooted in the perception that it symbolizes the repression, not expression, of individuality (288–90).[17]

To this, it might perhaps be objected that the goal of political theorists should not be to describe and explain the empirical world, but to come down on one side of the argument, and point us in the best possible political

[16]Cf. Eoin Daly, "Laïcité, gender equality and the politics of non-domination," *European Journal of Political Theory* (published online 5 September 2014): 6–7, 10–11; Peter Baehr and Daniel Gordon, "From the Headscarf to the Burqa: The Role of Social Theorists in Shaping Laws against the Veil," *Economy and Society* 42, no. 2 (2013): 265.

[17]This is further elaborated on in Gustavsson, "A Romantic Reading of the French 'Burqa Ban.'"

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direction. I would rather side with Berlin, however, who believed that scholars of ideas should engage in understanding the hidden categories and concepts in which we think and speak, and reveal how they are often distorted (271–73). This task, I believe, requires us to enter into the minds of public intellectuals who influence contemporary politics and imagine their point of view, as well as their potential lack of moral imagination.

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