

NEGATIVE LIBERTY / POSITIVE LIBERTY
A PERFORMANCE INSTALLATION
CONCEIVED BY CHRISTOPHER MCELROEN

READ ALOUD BY AN ARTIFICIAL MALE VOICE

isaiah.

isaiah berlin.

isaiah berlin
was a latvian-born british social and political theorist.

in 1912, at the age of seven,
isaiah berlin moved to russia.

during the russian revolution,
he witnessed, firsthand,

the extreme brutality of
politically motivated violence.

this experience haunted him.

it informed all that followed.

isaiah berlin,

in 1958,

delivered a now famous lecture at the university of oxford, entitled:

Two Concepts of Liberty

isaiah berlin
started his lecture with a statement:

to coerce a man is to deprive him of freedom.

almost every moralist in human history has praised freedom.

there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist.

isaiah berlin did not propose to discuss the history of this protean idea.

isaiah berlin proposed to examine only two political senses of the word.

Negative Liberty
&
Positive Liberty

LESSON I: THE NOTION OF NEGATIVE LIBERTY

answer the following question:

what is the area within which the subject
- you, listening to me-

are left alone, without interference by other people,
to become the person you would like to become?

you are normally said to have Liberty
to the degree to which no man, or body of men, interferes with your activity.

this is Negative Liberty;

the area within which one can act unobstructed by others.

if you are prevented by others from doing what you could otherwise do,
you are to that degree,

un-free.

if this area is contracted by other-men, beyond a certain minimum,
you can be described as being coerced.

am i coercing you?

or, it may be, that you are enslaved.

are you enslaved?

isaiah berlin argued, very plausibly,
that if one is too poor to afford something on which there is no legal ban

- a loaf of bread, a visit to the doctor, recourse in our courts of law -

this individual is as little free to have these things
as if they were forbidden by law.

what is Liberty to those who cannot make use of it?

can you make use of your Liberty
- you, listening to me?

without adequate conditions for the use of Liberty,
what is the value of Liberty?

LESSON II: THE NOTION OF POSITIVE LIBERTY

answer the following question:

what is the source of intervention
that can determine who you can and will become?

In other words, who will provide the adequate conditions
for the use of your Liberty?

And, if these conditions are provided to you, will you still be free?

the positive sense of the word Liberty
derives from your desire to be your own master.

do you

- you, listening to me -

desire to be your own master?

are you your own master?

consider the following:

does your life, and your decisions, depend on yourself,
not on external forces, of whatever kind?

what is the source of control, when it exists,
which can prevent you from doing what you wish?

how many possibilities are open to you?

how easy or difficult are they?

how do they compare with each other in your life plan?

do you have a life plan?

is it yours, or was it influenced by others?

are many people standing in the way of you achieving this plan?

who do you have to engage with to realize it?

are the possibilities within it, truthful?

are they valued by society?

are they worth pursuing?

*** to what extreme? ***

answer yes, or no, to the following questions:

do you wish, above all, to be conscious of yourself
as a thinking, willing, active member of
a civilized society?

do you wish, to bear responsibility for your choices
and be able to explain them by reference as
your own ideas and actions?

do you feel free to the degree
that you believe this to be true?

is this, true?

are your ideas and actions, your own?

or, are they mine?

IN CONCLUSION

the Positive Liberty which consists in being one's own master,
and the Negative Liberty which consists in not being prevented by others,

may, on the face of it, seem concepts
at no great logical distance from each other.

yet, the Positive and Negative notions of Liberty,
historically developed in divergent directions,
within a civilized society,
eventually and inevitably come into

direct
violent conflict
with each other.

isaiah.

isaiah berlin,

who at the age of seven witnessed, firsthand,

the extreme brutality of

politically motivated violence,

argued the true balance of Liberty
consists in the preservation of a space;

a space within which human personality
is to have the fullest possible play.

such a space is difficult to come by.
we offer you, this space.

you are now
at Liberty
to play.