

# 13.1b

## Sample Essay, with Tutor's Notes

*Please note that Tutors' comments are dependent on a number of factors, including the aims and learning outcomes for the module as a whole and for the set essay in particular. Although we feel the notes offered here would be typical of the sorts of comments Tutors might make on this assignment, there are a range of other perspectives and key points we might have included. For instance, we have tended towards comments on structure and writing style rather than subject content.*

### 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.

**Comment:** This is a very good introductory paragraph. The direction of the essay is clearly signposted and the limits of the discussion are outlined. It is well-written in clear prose.

**Comment:** This next paragraph is a little less clear. Political turmoil doesn't seem to be a theme of the essay and it doesn't support any aspect of the argument here. However, we do have a concise introduction to the first three theorists.

**Comment:** This is a concise definition: good work.

**Comment:** Consider moving this in-text reference to here: it makes the sentence flow better.

**Deleted:** (1651, cited in Brown, 2005)

**Comment:** This is a strong summary. To lend credibility, however, consider adding a short quotation either from Hobbes, or possibly Brown.

**Deleted:** (1689, cited in Brown, 2005)

**Comment:** The gist of this is correct, but the use of the word 'would' instead of 'should' detracts from the claim that Locke is a normativist. This summary is a little less clear than the one on Hobbes.

**Comment:** As the historical-political context is given for Hobbes and Locke, it would make sense to provide this for Rousseau as well.

**Comment:** Another strong summary.

**Comment:** Provide their dates so we know these are historical figures.

**Comment:** Again, a strong summary. Nice work!

**Comment:** This is an eloquent transition from the first set of arguments in the essay to the second set.

Hobbes, writing shortly after the English Civil War (1651, cited in Brown, 2005), 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, writing shortly afterwards (1689, cited in Brown, 2005) 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.

**Comment:** It would be helpful here to insert the name(s) of one or two critics to support this assertion.

**Comment:** This is an excellent transition; nicely set up with the cruise illustration.

**Comment:** Unfortunately, this claim doesn't follow logically from the previous statement and is more a criticism of one version of 'equality'.

**Comment:** This recuperates the previous statement, making it clear that there are different versions of equality.

**Comment:** As this is a direct quote, the in-text reference requires a page number.

**Comment:** This is an excellent summary – it would be stronger still with a short example from a policy document or speech material

**Comment:** Concepts?

**Comment:** It is important to indicate that this is Saward's contention.

**Comment:** This is clearly and concisely stated – nice work!

**Comment:** Again, where there is a direct quote, a page reference is required.

**Comment:** Well done to have brought the essay back to Hobbes; it is a bit late, however, to introduce Mill at this stage, unless Mill summarises the overall trajectory of the essay. I don't think he does, do you?

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 in the 1990s (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. As Mike Saward points out, 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, as Geoff Andrews asserts, 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 and varied 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).....

**Comment:** Well done to have stayed within the word limit. I have suggested a few points that might have been added; these would have put the word count up by less than 150 words, so within the 10% grace.

## Reference list

- Brown, V. (2005) 'Political legitimacy', in Andrews, G. and Saward, M. (eds), *Living Political Ideas*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Ch.1.
- Smith, J. (2005) 'Using theory', in Andrews, G. and Saward, M. (eds), *Living Political Ideas*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Ch.5.
- Middleton, D. (2005) 'Searching for justice', in Andrews, G. and Saward, M. (eds), *Living Political Ideas*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Ch.4.
- Saward, M. (2005) 'Them and us: national self-determination as a living political idea', in Andrews, G. and Saward, M. (eds), *Living Political Ideas*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Ch.2.
- Andrews, G. (2005) 'Dissent and the re-invention of politics', in Andrews, G. and Saward, M. (eds), *Living Political Ideas*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Ch.3.

## Tutor summary feedback

### Structure and format:

This is a well-structured and logically developed essay, with each section building on the last (with a few minor exceptions). There is a strong introduction and a reasonable conclusion, though the penultimate paragraph might have been modified and the words gained used to strengthen the conclusion. It would be good to know, for instance, the author's (defended) position, having worked through such an impressive range of points in the main body of the essay. The main body breaks into three main issues, each of which is given appropriate discussion and 'weight'. There was promise of a discussion of how different theories and concepts impact on our daily lives. The 'cruise' example was excellent in this regard, but this is an area that might have been more developed.

**Writing style and argument:**

The essay is very well written: the rhythm and pace of the essay makes it a terrifically enjoyable read. There are also some lovely turns of phrase and pithy summaries that add to the coherence of the piece. The essay makes good use of the arguments of different theorists and compares different concepts in a coherent fashion, making some good use of illustration/examples.

**Referencing and references:**

Although the in-text referencing system is unconventional, it is largely consistent and understandable. There are a few errors – for instance direct quotations which are not referenced with a page number. There are also some potential ‘misunderstandings’ about who is saying what, which could be easily rectified by putting the name of the chapter author at the start of a sentence and not just in brackets at the end. The reference list is fine, but at a higher level of study, or on a different module, it would be reasonable to expect the use of a greater range of source material, including some original source material.

In summary, this is a very strong essay – not quite perfect – but very much on its way to being first rate.