



POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE LIBERTY

On How Phillis Wheatley Used the Pen as a Sword in “On Being Brought from Africa to America”



Janire Hidalgo Aparicio

Degree in English Studies

Department of Philosophy

Area of Philosophy

Supervisor: Iñigo Galzacorta

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ABSTRACT

In recent times a growing interest and recognition of the liberation poetics of Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) has been identified by many scholars. Historically acknowledged as the first African American woman being published, she was, more than a poet, a symbol of a whole age marked by colonialism and slavery trade. Taking advantage of her personal characteristics – her African tradition and female gender – together with the historical context she experienced very much in person, Wheatley stood up against a White skinned male dominated world and used her poetry as a means to support the *Negro* struggle. For that purpose, Wheatley principally utilised irony and sarcasm to escape the authoritarian censorship of the time; this tendency of double meanings and implicit ideas, however, complicated her readings for a large proportion of society, and gave rise to several conflicting readings of her poetry for centuries. On account of this fact, in the present study I propose an interdisciplinary approach to Phillis Wheatley's poetry by connecting literature and philosophy, scrutinising one of her most anthologised poems "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1768) and employing, for this purpose, the two concepts of liberty provided by Isaiah Berlin in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958). The present paper, therefore, is based on the contrastive analysis of the principal notions of positive and negative liberty, their various interrelationships, and the manner they appear implicitly portrayed in Wheatley's poetry. The study of the aforementioned poem reveals that the writer's personal circumstances have been of significant importance with regard to its interpretation, since it implicitly illustrates numerous tensions within Wheatley's personal reflections which appear to be closely related with two different ways of comprehending the idea of liberty – these conflicts would be conceptualised, two centuries later, by Isaiah Berlin as positive and negative liberty. After being captured,

Wheatley was educated by her masters in Massachusetts, receiving a unique opportunity to cultivate her capabilities as individual and define herself. This imposed education was, undoubtedly, a restriction of her negative liberty which paradoxically resulted in her accomplishment of positive liberty and offered her the opportunity to conceive herself as a more independent human being. The author of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was entirely aware of this contradiction which, in some occasions, could interfere with the idea of liberty – it is precisely at that point where the expressive force of the poem resides. Bearing this in mind, my intention is to acclaim Wheatley’s poetic persona as one of the pioneers publically acclaiming racial identity, ethnicity and equality, among others. Finally, the paper concludes with some future research suggestions in pursuance of a more detailed conception of Phillis Wheatley.

Keywords: philosophy, colonialism, liberty, racial identity, coercion

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INTRODUCTION

Recognised as the first African American female being published, Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) is more than a mere poet of the eighteenth century. Being forced to be a victim of the economic system of slavery trade, she was captured in her African place of birth at the age of seven and relocated to Massachusetts, America. Such assault to her liberty resulted a unique opportunity for Wheatley to develop her linguistic competences as well as her writing abilities – in the White America she learned Latin, Greek and English languages, among others, and made use of them to become an extraordinary poetry writer. One of the most striking aspects of this issue happens to be the evidence that Wheatley took advantage of irony and sarcasm to confront the stringent authoritarian censorship of the time, which gave rise to numerous conflicting readings and misinterpretations of her literary production – it has even been claimed that she was not implicated in the *Negro* struggle for liberty (Bilbro, 2012; Shields, 2004)¹.

This brings us to the question of whether we have appropriately interpreted Wheatley's words. "I suspect the fact that she eventually does not wear the mask of subversion" declares Shields "may be one of the factors which confounded and confounds many of her readers" (2004:26). Anyone reading Wheatley's poetry could perceive the application of her personal reality – especially ethnic race and gender – for her convenience when dealing with ethnicity, self-identity, racial equality and religion issues. However, her status as a prestigious author has not been acknowledged consistently; and I personally find this final year Project a perfect occasion for doing so, as I feel it is precisely today when the attributes and qualities of every social minority member – such as women or Black people – should be openly admitted and praised, and these include the intellectual aspect. On account of this fact, my intention in this paper would be to suggest that, even though she does not condemn her being brought from Africa to America in an explicit manner, Phillis Wheatley utilised the instruction she received in America to denounce the coercion Africans' liberty did suffer with colonialism.

¹ "By looking back over her short life, Wheatley, herself a victim of this evil, affirms that God has miraculously shown his mercy to her through other people's sin and yet she does not excuse this sin: a difficult and complex declaration" (Bilbro, 2012:565)

With this goal, I will avail myself of her two most advantageous characteristics, her African background and female gender, in order to provide an additional interdisciplinary perspective of Wheatley's poetry, establishing some connections with the two concepts of liberty presented by Isaiah Berlin in what is described as "the most influential single essay in contemporary political philosophy" (Skinner, 2002), *Two Concepts of Liberty*. In line with this view, the natural essence of a human being is to flourish in complete freedom. That conception of freedom has been so immense and unbounded that there are still no provided limitations for it, even if certain approaches can be mentioned. One of these suggestions to clarify the issue of liberty is that offered by Berlin, which advocates two different senses of liberty that, being usually complementary, could overlap and invalidate each other; the positive and the negative, respectively. While the former is related with the capability of every living person to comprehend her inner self and determine her own path, the latter contends the idea of preserving the absence of external influences when it comes to personal decisions, thus creating a private area of non-intrusion, where not even the governmental forces could interfere. On this point, one could feel oppressed if not recognised as an individual human being capable of taking control of her life, but she could also develop a sense of belonging towards any mistreated or tyrannised community; in such case, that person would fight for the liberation of the entire group (Berlin, 1958), just as Phillis Wheatley did.

The paper is organised as it follows: I will firstly establish the philosophical criterion utilised as the contextual framework, briefly explaining the basic concepts of liberty presented by Berlin. I will then provide some connections between those ideas and slave trade, trying to comprehend both captives' and captors' judgements about freedom. After that, I will analyse Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" in view of the two aforementioned perspectives, finally concluding with some general remarks together with suggestions for future research lines.

1. TWO CORRELATIVE LIBERTIES: A FURTHER INTERPRETATION OF FREEDOM

“(...) To understand [all historical] movements or conflicts is, above all, to understand the ideas or attitudes of life involved in them, which alone make such movements a part of human history, and not mere natural events.” (Berlin, 1958)

Establishing the boundaries and parameters of the word ‘liberty’ has been an arduous task throughout history. According to the English idealist and social liberalist Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882), “real freedom consists in the whole man having found his object. To attain freedom is thus to have attained harmony with the true law of one’s being. *To speak of the freedom of a man is to speak of the state in which he shall have realised his ideal of himself*”²(cited in Skinner, 2002:240-41). Liberty has been proved vital for the fundamental principles of the concept of humanity, and therefore, claimed and fought for, century after century. Indeed, Berlin points out that some of the most important disagreements and conflicts in modern history were based on the conflict or dialect between two distinctive “systems of ideas which return different and conflicting answers to what has long been the central question of politics” (1958:121); positive liberty and negative liberty³.

Characterised by a high degree of rationalism and self-definition, positive liberty is determined by the individual aspiration to master one’s life – the living person that aims to take control of her life choices and decisions, nullifying the influence of external factors of any kind. In line with this theory, the individual contemplates the idea of being a subject rather than any simple object or animal, thus claiming the right to be the one and only responsible for her particular circumstances:

I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from

² Italics not in the original.

³ Though some scholars, such as Quentin Skinner for instance, did identify the need for a third sense of liberty being recognised (Skinner, 2002), I will only focus on the binary interpretation presented by Isaiah Berlin in 1958.

outside, as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role (Berlin, 1958:131)

We are enslaved by despots which can be removed only by being analysed and understood. I am free if, and only if, I plan my life in accordance with my own will; plans entail rules; a rule does not oppress me or enslave me if I impose it on myself consciously, or accept it freely, having understood it, whether it was invented by me or by others. (Berlin, 1958:143-44)

I find indispensable for this purpose the capacity of determination to renounce unattainable goals, in order to escape from vulnerability while creating an autonomous and secure atmosphere – the so-called process of self-emancipation. As Berlin indicates, “this is a form of the search for security; but it has also been called the search for personal or national freedom or independence” (1958:136). To reach this self-sufficiency status, in any case, the individual will need a sense of rationalism which can only be acquired through education. According to this perspective, and considering wrongdoings irrational acts, if each person behaved and responded rationally, understanding their own nature, it would not be any conflict or dispute; “If the universe is governed by reason, then there will be no need for coercion” explains Berlin, “a correctly planned life for all will coincide with full freedom – the freedom of rational self-direction – for all” (1958:147). Similarly, any administrator of social life or legislator should assume the fact that, when the established laws are of rational nature, they will be embraced and internalised by the rest of the community without resistance.

A rational or free state would be a state governed by such laws as all rational men would freely accept; that is to say, such laws as they would themselves have enacted had they been asked what, as rational beings, they demanded; hence the frontiers would be such as all rational men would consider to be the right frontiers for rational beings (Berlin, 1958:145)

Positive liberty, therefore, consists on recognising ourselves, identifying our inner passions, making our own decisions and determining our future, thusly “achieving a sense of harmony with our nature” (Skinner, 2002:243).

The other concept of freedom, for its part, advocates the conception of liberty as the absence of any interference or coercion in one’s personal decisions. Coercion, anyhow, does not cover every single occasion of interference in one’s decision-making process. We cannot state, for instance, that one is coerced or manipulated because she is not fully

free to read, if she is suffering from blindness. Negative liberty implies the non-intrusion, either explicitly or implicitly, of an extrinsic force⁴ which could, no matter to what extent, restrain a free individual. In this sense, if a Basque person, for instance, would like to travel to France, and could do so without problem, she would consider herself free. The violation of negative liberty would occur whenever someone or something restrained the travel or obstructed her path (if the documents of the person in question are withheld, for example). If an individual perceives any kind of control, pressure or deprivation from the right to live her own life, then one could assert her being coerced:

The criterion of oppression is the part that I believe to be played by other human beings, directly or indirectly, with or without the intention of doing so, in frustrating my wishes. By being free in this sense I mean not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom. (Berlin, 1958:123)

This utopian notion of liberty is illustrated by Berlin with an image of an ideal field with no obstacles, where nothing can obstruct one, only the notion of self-control (1958). However, the magnitude of this area with non-interferences is quite controversial, as its limits have never been officially established. Several philosophers, John Locke and John Stuart Mill for instance, advocate a large area of private life stating this would be totally in accordance with a harmonious social life, whereas conservative thinkers maintain the need for a considerable control of human beings. The only fact that cannot be undeniable in this polemic is that the area in question could not be boundless, since, if it were, it would contribute to a chaotic society in which weak individuals would be oppressed by the strong ones (Berlin, 1958) and there will be no opportunities to develop spontaneity, originality or morality. Likewise, it should ensure a minimum of independence with regard to the freedom of expression, opinion and religion, among others. Within this tradition, I find indispensable to underline the fact that the one's liberty has traditionally been restricted by the liberty of the other – this is the fundamental principle of political liberalism, based on the political supremacy of negative

⁴ The term 'extrinsic force' does not embody every single interposition between a human being and her life choices; it is particularly referred to other human beings or any element arranged by them (a chain, or a wall, for instance).

liberty; I can do whatever I wish, if and only if the rest of my fellows can accomplish, at the same time, what they want to.⁵

In any case, the endeavour to differentiate positive and negative liberties, and dichotomise them as two distinct concepts is not a straightforward work, since there are many occasions when one concept overlaps the other. Negative liberty, for example, appears to be in favour of non-interference, though as Berlin explains, “the freedom of some must at times be curtailed to secure the freedom of others” (1958:126). In other words, such interference could be justifiable under some circumstances in which state intervention would be considered necessary⁶. Positive liberty, on the other hand, aims to safeguard the individual right for self-determination, even if this could not be achievable at all; even though one could master her life and be considered slave to no human, one could never escape from the deepest passions of her own nature⁷. Besides, some life choices are not completely free, as they can be conditioned or determined by other factors beyond our control.

Once the foundations of these two concepts are established, one should ask herself which of them results more favourable “to our deepest human interests and purposes” (Skinner, 2002:264), but I am afraid there is still no response for that inquiry. The matter of liberty has been brought into debate over centuries, and the only unquestionable certitude is that it requires, in its complete interpretation, both a positive and a negative sense. A positive sense which recognises every single individual as a human being capable of rationalising and, therefore, capable of controlling her own life and destiny; and a negative sense which grants the absence of any coercing element in one’s liberty.

⁵ Basing myself on the absence of interference which the concept of negative liberty defends, I could, for instance, put under lock and key that neighbour I extremely hate; however, this cannot be possible mainly because my right to act freely implies an intervention in the liberty of the person in question.

⁶ Following the aforementioned example, if an individual would have locked up another person, enjoying her personal freedom but restraining that of the others, the government could – and should – interfere in the situation.

⁷ Inner passions are characterised by being strong emotional impulses that cannot be dominated by reason, and therefore, controlled. This idea could be illustrated with the notion of human’s natural instinct; if two friends would be trapped for a long period of time in an isolate island where they had to survive, the probabilities of ending up feeding each other would be reasonably high. In such case, their nature essence would nullify every rational attempt to stop or regulate that survival instinct.

2. LIBERTY IN THE ENSLAVED AFRICA

“Every age has its own poetry; in every age the circumstances of history choose a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch by creating situations that can be expressed or transcended only through poetry.” (Quoted in Fanon, 1986:134)

Basing on the philosophical framework presented by these two concepts of liberty, I consider fundamental the exposition of the socio-historical background of the time, in order to conceive the atmosphere in which Phillis Wheatley cultivated not only herself but also her writing. Throughout the eighteenth century the world was involved in the slavery trade, a wrongdoing by which many basic notions of human life were desecrated – those regarding enslaved people, as well as their captors. Slave trade happened to be essential in the development of the modern world economy, as it produced numerous fundamental elements and commodities for mass consumer markets such as sugar, tobacco, coffee, cocoa and cotton, among others. What is more, slavery contributed to the development of European shipping and gun making, to the point of becoming one of Europe’s most worthwhile and lucrative industries between 15th and 18th centuries.

Leaving out the tough conditions slaves did suffer in those extremely long journeys, the imposed nature of this economical system has caused heated controversy all over the world. Europeans – and colonisers in general – elaborated this plan rationally but on their own, dismissing Africans’ feelings and opinions, as they were not supposed to have a rational foundation. Incidentally, we must not forget that, when human beings are treated as objects – living instruments which serve to some particular and individual purpose – their human essence is denied, thus being manipulated and, to all intents and purposes, degraded:

“The Negroes can’t even imagine what freedom is. They don’t want it, they don’t demand it. It’s the white agitators who put that into their heads. And if you gave it to them, they wouldn’t know what to do with it” (Cesare 1972, cited in Hesse, 2014: 295)

“Abandoning the concept of reason altogether, I may conceive myself as an inspired artist, who moulds men into patterns in the light of his unique vision, as

painters combine colours or composers sounds; humanity is the raw material upon which I impose my creative will; even though men suffer and die in the process, they are lifted by it to a height to which they could never have risen without my coercive – but creative – violation of their lives. This is the argument used by every dictator, inquisitor, and bully who seeks some moral, or even aesthetic, justification for his conduct. I must do for men (or with them) what they cannot do for themselves, and I cannot ask their permission or consent, because they are in no condition to know what is best for them” (Berlin, 1958:251).

Not only was slavery atrocious for Black Africans, who were considered mere instruments to merchandise and make money in a market at worldwide scale; it was also, in Montesquieu’s words, detrimental for their owners since, by means of her unrestrained power, exposes himself to the threat of losing her humanity and become a beast:

"Slavery, properly so called, is the establishment of a right which gives to one man such a power over another as renders him absolute master of his life and fortune. The state of slavery is in its own nature bad. It is nether useful to the master nor to the slave; not to the slave, because he can do nothing through a motive of virtue; nor to the master because by having an unlimited authority over his slaves he insensibly accustoms himself to the want of all moral virtues, and thence becomes fierce, hasty, severe, choleric, voluptuous and cruel" (Montesquieu, 1955:261).

The political theory of liberty was only applied to the hegemonic Western and white America, whereas racial minorities were completely foreclosed⁸; negative liberty was violated in the case of enslaved people, who were both physically and psychologically imprisoned and chained, while, in contrast, the right to determine themselves was only conceded to white people, who chose to master not only their lives, but also those of Black people – hence the association of the economic system of colonialism with coercion. With regard to this situation, Berlin maintains that:

⁸ “Foreclosure is a mechanism that simply treats the foreclosed *as if it did not exist*” (Grigg, 2008 cited in Hesse, 2014).

If the tyrant (or ‘hidden persuader’) manages to condition his subjects (or customers) into losing their original wishes and embrace (‘internalize’) the form of life he has invented for them (...), he will, no doubt, have made them feel free (...), but what he has created is the very antithesis of political freedom (1958:140)

In view of these extreme circumstances was created slave narrative, a literary production that, by collecting “accounts of their [slaves’] life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave” (Hesse, 2014:48), serves as a testimony to the atrocity which is slavery. Phillis Wheatley, together with her Black fellows, aimed to disseminate her personal experiences regarding slavery trade and liberty, and those of the people she left behind in Africa. Despite the fact that she has never explicitly condemned her forced and involuntary transferring from Africa to America, because she considered it a unique opportunity to acquire and cultivate her humanity and writing competences, Wheatley’s intention was to denounce the coercion suffered by enslaved people and their liberties, since they were deprived of such a fundamental right as freedom is – we must not forget that there were these favourable conditions which led Phillis Wheatley to understand that, by means of coercion, and therefore, the denial of her negative liberty, she could achieve the positive sense of her freedom. In this way, “Wheatley's poetry demonstrates her unique capacity first to grasp with amazing speed and agility the literary mode of American classicism but then to reshape this mode in such a way that it becomes the vehicle for expression of her *liberation poetics*” (Shields, 2008:13).

3. PHILLIS WHEATLEY AND HER “On Being Brought from Africa to America”

Born in the country of Gambia, West Africa, Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) is widely recognised as one of the founders of black American female literary tradition, and the first African-American woman being published. Kidnapped from a very early age, she suffered a thorough deprivation of identity – even the name by which this unique poet is known was imposed to her; The Phillis is the name of the ship that brought the little girl to America, whereas Wheatley is the surname of the family that purchased her in Massachusetts. Being arrived to Boston the summer of 1761, she

integrated herself into a completely different culture while preserving the strongly rooted ideology and beliefs of her native land. Wheatley assimilated the linguistic reality of her new home so expeditiously that, within less than two years, she was able to properly speak and read in English language, including, as Bennet relates in her work “the most difficult part of the Sacred Writings” (1998:65). Considering her human condition as a slave, and what is more, as a slave woman, it is undeniable that Wheatley received an exceptional privileged opportunity for education. At the age of twenty, and with the support and encouragement of Wheatley family, she published her one and only book entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). On this basis, we could acknowledge that Phillis Wheatley did achieve her freedom by means of education, but even this opportunity was an externally imposed choice; this coercive decision was, paradoxically, what made our poet free to critically contemplate and consider her situation and that of those around her.

Although she struggled to legitimise herself as a recognised poet in America, Wheatley did never forget her African slave origins and influences. Several scholars consider this Black skinned poet a religious dogmatist, and therefore, a disloyal to her fellows⁹; many other versed in the matter, on the other hand, maintain that she used her literary persona to portray the tough situation of her Black fellows and widespread it – the latter position is, precisely, the one I will support. For this purpose, she utilised a sophisticated ironical tone and made use of the concepts of freedom or equality as the basis for her writings, thus positioning herself against oppression and defending the right to be different, but considered equal:

Trying neither to evade the consequences of her racialized difference nor to hide behind European literary conventions, Wheatley placed at the centre of her work the tensions and possibilities her difference produced. (Bennet, 1998:65)

Even she suffered them, Wheatley never wrote explicitly about displacement and oppression; instead, she centred the basis of her poetry on American liberal politics, and the basic notion which maintains that all human beings are created equal (Shields, 2008). Wheatley considered herself and all individuals in general identically natural, regardless of their skin colour, sex or place of birth. For this reason, she considered the institution of slavery atrocious, cold-blooded and inhuman, and self-defined her poetic

⁹ "She was not concerned with the problems of Negroes or the country" (see Shields, 2008:26)

role challenging the traditional boundaries, establishing herself as a black female slave in a predominant white male literary world. Consequently, the gist of this matter is the fact that Wheatley consciously utilised her personal condition and social identity to pronounce on the coercion and manipulation all humankind, but especially her Black fellows, were suffering.

With Phillis Wheatley's background and the poetic identity she constructed in mind, my principal goal in this work is, as I mentioned at the very beginning, to analyse one of her most famous and anthologised poems, which at the same time, could be considered misinterpreted in many occasions:

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1768)¹⁰

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Composed of four exceptional heroic couplets written in iambic pentameter, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is an autobiographical poem which portrays the impressions and reflections of an African slave woman with regard to her difficult voyage from her native land to the “glorious” America. According to the meaning of the poem, the composition could be subdivided in two different fragments; while the former is focused on the spiritual liberation and redemption religion was supposed to offer – this being presented as the rational justification used by captors to vindicate slavery –

¹⁰ Collected in Wheatley's collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)

the latter, for its part, illustrates the Christian perceptions concerning *Negros* by means of a synecdoche (line 5), thus situating the writer and her community in a critical context. The dehumanization process to which Wheatley and many others were subdued results explicit even in the title of the poem, since she was brought from one land to another without considering her opinion. Furthermore, the speaker emphasises the presence of binary opposites and irony by using italics ([Christian] mercy vs. *Pagan* land; benighted soul vs. [teach to] understand; *Christians* vs. *Negros*) with the intention of discussing controversial ideas of religion, ethnic identity, racial equality and liberty. The gratefulness Wheatley feels for being brought from her land to America is undeniable; however, as far as the meaning of the poem is concerned, this could be interpreted in view of two antagonistic perspectives; the Christian and the Pagan.

According to a religious perspective, we could affirm that Wheatley intended to justify her captive condition by declaring that “God might bring some good from the evil slave trade” (Bilbro, 2012:564). The poem suggests that, having a deprived liberty, the writer attained in religion the metaphysical freedom to express herself by writing. With this in mind, the personification of ‘mercy’ results crucial, as it is the responsible for Wheatley’s both physical and spiritual voyage, and represents the sense of redemption Christianisation offers. Mercy acquires also a significant importance when becoming a kind of mentor for the ‘benighted’ soul of the African – it reveals her the existence of a saviour God. Bearing in mind this salvation, the message spread in the two last verses of the poem seems to be essential (‘Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,/ May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train’), since it states that even pagan *negroes* could be saved if turned to Christianity. Arising out of this, the writer’s appeal for equality and tolerance seems unquestionable:

“Interestingly the specific moral faculty that Wheatley commands her readers to exercise in order to properly repent is that of memory. Wheatley’s memory of her own redemption models the process of remembering, and she then orders her readers to remember that the colour that matters on the judgement day will not be skin colour but soul colour.” (Bilbro, 2012:566)

This characterisation of slavery as something compassionate and charitable, per contra, entailed many critiques and negative commentaries, thus becoming “On Being Brought from Africa to America” one of the most denigrated literary productions regarding African-American tradition – even Wheatley’s credibility was questioned in

public, as she was apparently unable to write those words, both because the religious perspective of the content appeared to be conflicting with her pagan African hometown, and because it was inconceivable that the author of such good poetry was a slave woman (Shields, 2008).

However, we must not forget the Pagan perspective of this poem, and perhaps the most faithful to Wheatley's original communicative intentions. In the light of this non-religious view, she observes a chasm between her Black community and captor Christians who dehumanise the poet and her fellows for economic purposes (Shields, 2008). Historic contextualization is suggested to be favourable for this point of view, since it could help us readers to contemplate her positioning against those who did not consider Africans as equally natural and rational human beings, thus using them merchandise for personal purposes. The imposed nature of her journey is recognised even in the title, as she was 'brought' from Africa to America. I will also remark the ironical tone used by the poet when stating that mercy taught soul her the existence of a God, even when she ignored it, and what is more, did not desire it. Wheatley's sarcasm is also present in the sixth line, when she mentions a typical negative attitude towards black race in general ("Their colour is a diabolic die"), thus representing the so-rooted belief that *negroes* are condemned to die because of their skin colour. It would be also interesting to analyse the two last verses of the poem from this perspective ('Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,/ May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train'), as their meaning varies completely; if we carefully pay attention to the way they are written, we will notice the small nuance that supports the fundamental assumption that all human beings are created equal. The words 'Christians' and 'Negroes' are separated by a single comma which positions them together, stressing the idea that no race should be considered better than the other one.

Wheatley repeatedly alludes to her African heritage, thus demonstrating that, notwithstanding the fact that she demanded some recognition as a writer and member of her new community, she considered herself completely African – this complex and sometimes contradictory position was, with no doubt, the centre of her literary production (Bennet, 1998). She confronted and challenged the ideologies which sentenced the entire Black race to entire nullity, hence the need to recognise "Wheatley's role as a politically astute Black woman whose primary objective was ever to promote liberation for all Americans, regardless of colour" (Shields, 2008:90).

4. **BERLIN'S POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE LIBERTY IN WHEATLEY'S "On Being Brought from Africa to America"**

Wheatley's poetry could be considered confusing and controversial, as it requires a high knowledge of her background to understand it appropriately. When reading "On Being Brought from Africa to America", a significant number of key issues come to scene, from those related to the religious dogmatism perceived throughout the poem, to those regarding her revolutionary attitudes towards slavery trade. In this context, I will try to utilise the recourses proportionated by Berlin's philosophy in order to analyse the implicit problems Wheatley's poem is composed of. For doing so, I will link Wheatley's ideas of self-identity and racial-equality with the two concepts of liberty proposed by Isaiah Berlin.

As I have previously explained, these two different ideas regarding freedom are characterised by being complementary, but in several occasions, they can result non compatible, since they can come into direct conflict with each other. The positive sense of liberty, which is based on the recognition of humans as rational beings capable of mastering their own lives and realising themselves is, to certain extent, paradoxical. According to this perspective, individuals manifest their need of being determined by personal purposes, with no external causes affecting their decisions. Berlin explains this viewpoint as it follows:

I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realize that it is not (1958:131)

The complication comes to scene when the real or autonomous self, the conscious part of an individual, confronts the irrational self, the unstoppable impulse of one's inner passions and desires. In this manner, one could feel completely free to decide to buy tobacco or not, for instance, but that individual could not stop the uncontrollable the mental and physical need to smoke:

"I am my own master"; 'I am slave to no man'; but I may not (as Platonists or Hegelians tend to say) be a slave to nature? Or to any inner passions?" (Berlin 1958, 132)

Similarly, an individual cannot affirm being completely free simply because she has obtained the opportunity to make a decision. Some life choices are not totally boundless, and therefore, we could state that determinations are not always autonomous. The extent of one's freedom depends on the number of available possibilities and the relevance such possibilities are with regard to one's personal circumstances (Berlin, 1958):

“If in a totalitarian state I betray my friend under threat of torture, perhaps even if I act from fear of losing my job, I can reasonably say that I did not act freely. Nevertheless, I did, of course, make a choice, and could, at any rate in theory, have chosen to be killed or tortured or imprisoned. The mere existence of alternatives is not, therefore, enough to make my action free” (Berlin 1958:130)

Considering these argumentation, one should understand that the promotion of positive liberty could become eventually in a totalitarian attitude. When an entire community is coerced in the name of some general goal such as freedom, peace or justice, the person in charge could justify her actions by saying such coercion or manipulation is for their own future good, just as happened with colonisers. In this case, the ruler could justify herself by claiming that she knows “what they truly need better than they know it themselves” (Berlin, 1958:133). Although these attitudes are considered cruel impersonations, they seem to be essential for self-determination ideologies.

Similar dilemmas can be found when carefully analysing negative liberty, concerned with the private are for self-development each person should obtain. Freedom in this case would be related to the fact that there is no individual than oneself interfering in her moves and decisions. This sense of liberty, however, is not a primary need for every single human being; the freedom that each person demands varies depending on their social status or economic position, and those who possess it have gained it by exploiting and oppressing those who are in a lower scale (Berlin, 1958).

Despite the fact that negative liberty claims the absence of any kind of coercion, various thinkers – John Stuart Mill among them – show support for adaptability with regard to the term coercion; in exceptional occasions, they maintain, compulsion could be justified. On this basis, a democratic regime could not guarantee every single liberty to its community, as well as a sovereign totalitarian could choose to maintain the personal freedom of her subjects:

“All coercion is, in so far as it frustrates human desires, bad as such, although it may have to be applied to prevent other, greater evils; while non-interference, which is the opposite of coercion, is good as such, although it is not the only good” (Berlin 1958:128)

Such acceptance is, precisely, what Phillis Wheatley denounced by using her poetry; that African people lose their liberty due to the violent actions against them carried out by Europeans and White Americans who, without even considering their opinion, forced them to be victims of the tyrannical slavery trade, capturing and enslaving them. Such atrocities were used to be justified with the aforementioned arguments – according to the White captors, their assaults to the liberties of Africans were carried out for the future common good of all, thus reinforcing the totalitarian attitudes they used to endorse. What is more, history cannot deny that some liberal masters offered access to the American educational system to some of their slaves; John Wheatley, for example. In exceptional cases, that education would help enslaved Negroes develop their potentialities as individuals, stimulate their personal construction of a critical capacity and finally, help them in the arduous process of achieving freedom being aware of the singularities of their culture and fighting for racial identity. Nevertheless, we must not forget that *imposition* was done by means of force. We can find these attitudes ironically illustrated in the first lines of “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, where Wheatley describes her capture: “Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,/ Taught my benighted soul to understand/ That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too:/One I redemption neither sought nor knew.”)

Even admitting that by means of such an atrocity white people gained economic prosperity and freedom, those benefits were acquired by degrading human nature, and therefore, they were completely immoral and inhuman:

If the liberty of myself or my class or nation depends on the misery of a number of other human beings, the system which promotes this is unjust and immoral. But if I curtail or lose my freedom, in order to lessen the shame of such inequality, and do not thereby materially increase the individual liberty of others, an absolute loss of liberty occurs. This may be compensated for by a gain in justice or in happiness or in peace, but the loss remains (1958:125)

To threaten a man with persecution unless he submits to a life in which he exercises no choices of his goals; to block before him every door but one, no

matter how benevolent the motives of those who arrange this, is to sin against the truth that he is a man, a being with a life of his own to live (1958:127)

Relating this idea with Phillis Wheatley, and paying special attention to “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, it would be appropriate to consider the reasons for the complicated and committed message she spread worldwide. Wheatley found herself in a complicated situation; she was the living proof that made clear the libertarian contradictions implicit in the actions carried out by White captors. The education she received thanks to the Wheatley family once she was in Massachusetts was nothing but an exception which offered her a unique opportunity to approach herself to the best side of the west tradition. Through the process of acquiring these occidental conventions, Wheatley took advantage of the humanities she learned in order to understand the heterogeneous and complicated nature of existence, cultivate her critical capacity and make herself more conscious of her humanity. In this context, it seems indisputable that the denial of Wheatley’s negative liberty, her captivity and enslavement, paradoxically ended up offering her the opportunity to achieve her positive liberty. It appears to be contradictory that the person who provided Phillis Wheatley the so advantageous education, by means of which she could flourish her personal capabilities and subsequently achieve freedom in its positive sense, was John Wheatley, the man who bought her, contributing this way to slavery trade. Still, we must not forget it was through this educational process when Wheatley accomplished her positive liberty and constructed her individual self, consequently defining her identity as a poet. On this basis, Wheatley discovered in literature, and more specifically in poetry, a medium to express herself and illustrate her inner sense of pain, the moral tensions she suffered with regard to the right and wrong, the good and evil. If it was not for her master, who bought her and offered her the opportunity to develop herself personally as well as academically, Wheatley would not have been the analytical person she became in. It was through education that she developed a profound appreciation of human intricacies and virtues, thus trying to comprehend her natural essence as well as the others’. So that was why Wheatley was able to express the tensions and contradictions every existence goes through in such a great manner. Not only that, but we cannot certainly know if she could have developed her literary potential in her native Africa the same way she did in America, where she became an exceptionally skilful

author. Likewise, we could not firmly assert that if she would not have lived the atrocities she went through being a child, Phillis Wheatley would have contemplated the ideas of equality or liberation regarding racial identity as central concepts of her introspection, and later on, her poetry.

The poem I analysed in this paper, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, implicitly illustrates the author’s awareness of that contradiction, which two centuries later Isaiah Berlin would refer to as positive and negative liberty. Phillis Wheatley did criticise her being removed from her African land and forced to be relocated in America, but at the same time, she was totally conscious of the fact that, thanks to the coercion she suffered, she had the opportunity to discover a new world which allowed her cultural development and personal reflection. The process in question, apart from providing Wheatley with numerous professional abilities, contributed to her personal growth and social consciousness – here is precisely where the expressive force of the poem resides, since it reflects the tensions and contradictions Wheatley did experience. This is the main reason why we could declare that the magnificent literary production of Phillis Wheatley may not have been the same without the influence of a tyrannical economic system based on slavery which justified the intrusion in Africans’ lives.

All in all, what remains irrefutable in both Wheatley’s and Berlin’s work is that both defend the essentiality of two complementary principles: that human rights should be respected as absolute, leaving aside the power, and that the parameters that constitute the image of a human being need to be unassailable, in order to impede the invasion of external forces in the minimum area of non-interference we deserve in our lives (Berlin, 1958). In this context, Hesse explains, European colonialism could be described as an interference with the right of freedom and independence of African people (2014).

5. CONCLUSION

In this project, I have examined the significance of the issue of liberty in Wheatley's poetry, especially focusing on one of her most anthologised but at the same time polemical pieces of writing, "On Being Brought from Africa to America", trying to demonstrate that Wheatley made use of her abilities as a writer, together with her personal circumstances – race and gender – to raise her voice in a White male dominated community to accuse colonisers of nullifying African people's liberties, thus depriving them of such basic human right as freedom is. Slavery trade and the colonialist ideology in general diminished Negroes' right for self-determination to the extent that their decision-making abilities were considered invalid – freedom in the most complete of its senses was only recognised to white skinned people. In this manner, the negative sense of liberty presented by Isaiah Berlin was non-existent for colonised African people, since there was a significant coercion in their right to decide and define themselves. Black skinned people were not considered human beings, and therefore, the right to let them be owners of their lives and destinies was almost unconceivable – this conception of humans as little more than animals was not applied to white people, as they did have the right to take their own decisions and master their life pathways.

The intentional focus of my project was to carefully analyse the poetry written by Wheatley, trying to employ philosophy – and in particular, a conceptual distinction presented by Isaiah Berlin – in order to obtain a closer approach to and better appreciation of the implicit ideas behind her words. One of the main foundations of her role as a writer was the fact that she was captured and brought to an unfamiliar land to work as a slave; being a young girl Wheatley immersed in a foreign culture, different from that of her native Gambia, acquired its language and traditions, considering her circumstance as an opportunity to criticise the system from the inside. As Shields indicates, "this talented, sensitive and intelligent writer knew full well the power of the pen and she often wielded that *pen as a sword*"¹¹(2008:28).

¹¹ Italics not in the original. This expression is particularly emphasised for being, in my personal opinion, the most explicit and graphic metaphor with reference to Phillis Wheatley. This is also the main reason why I decided to employ it in the title of my project.

The main aim of the poetry written by Phillis Wheatley was not to offer amusement or pleasure to its readers; instead, she utilised literature as a device to make the world reconsider the ideology they used to support heretofore. This African writer represented absolute freedom by using poetry, with the one and only aim of liberate the oppressed, no matter their colour, social position or nationality.

For a better approach to Wheatley's influence in the globe, I find interesting to scrutinise some other poems written by her, such as "On Recollection" (1773) for instance, another poem where she identifies Christian religion as rational basic defence and justification of slavery trade. It would also be significantly more effective if we consider Wheatley's role in politics of liberalism and her influence on the anti-slavery movement as a future research line, so that we can create a more appropriate contextual framework when reading Phillis Wheatley in the future.

And eventually, I would like to finish my essay with an observation presented by Benjamin Constant, who indicated that unlimited authority appears to be dangerous for any political system due to the quantity of power that embodies. Considering this premise, and connecting it with the two senses of the concept of 'liberty', individual power for the self-determination positive liberty requires would not be the dilemma, but the quantity of power one has for doing so, since it can result destructive. "It is not the arm that is unjust" affirms Constant "but the weapon that is too heavy – some weights are too heavy for the human hand" (cited in Berlin, 1958:163)

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